

## CONSOLIDATING CONGREGATIONS

St. Louis area churches find new homes in other churches

**ETHAN COLBERT**

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McAdoo Art Services workers move the 14-foot-tall wire cross that hung above the altar of Webster Groves Christian Church on Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2025. Clockwise from bottom are owner Daryl McAdoo, Micah Fisher, Tommy Dangerfield. PHOTO BY ROBERT COHEN, POST-DISPATCH

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# **S**ELLING AND NESTING

WEBSTER GROVES — For 70 years, Webster Groves Christian Church sat at the corner of Lockwood Avenue and South Berry Road.

Now the church is on the move — into another church's building.

Faced with mounting maintenance bills and a decades-long decline in membership, the 130-member congregation is leaving behind its iconic church steeple and 300-seat sanctuary.

It is joining a growing number of congregations in the St. Louis area and across the country that are selling their historic sanctuaries and are nesting — or leasing space — within another congregation's church.

"There were boiler issues. There were roof issues. There were plumbing issues. There were air conditioning issues," said Pastor Jeff Moore, who has led the Webster Groves congregation for 17 years.

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Cost projections for the repairs ranged from \$800,000 to \$1 million, he said.

Church leaders deliberated for months. Ultimately, they decided to move into Webster Groves Baptist Church and to sell their church property.

"It is a beautiful building full of memories — I was baptized there, I was married there, my dad's funeral was there," said Kay Love, a longtime member and the board chair of the congregation.

"But in the end, it is the memories of people being together ... of being in the choir, and all the other times together that made it special. I will carry those with me wherever we go," she said.

Dr. Larry Brown, a pastor and a retired religious studies professor at the University of Missouri in Columbia, said churches of nearly every major denomination, particularly in urban areas, are "hunkering down in order to survive" a decrease in the number of people attending services.

He said this consolidation of churches harkens back to the 1980s, when rural church congregations either combined or closed in large numbers as their communities grappled with the farm foreclosure crisis.

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**Kay Love**, a longtime member of Webster Groves Christian Church

"Across rural Missouri today you will find 'union churches' and that's not a Civil War reference. That is because two denominations in those communities decided it made sense to share a building, and ultimately merged," Brown said. "The result of nesting might just be the creation of a new congregation."

The moves, he said, "are oftentimes coming out of desperation."

"When a church like Webster Groves Christian Church — which has historically been seen as a leader within the Disciples of Christ denomination in the St. Louis area — decides to give up its building, that is something worth paying attention to," said Brown.

**'Wasn't sustainable'**



Religious participation overall has been declining in the United States for decades, multiple studies have found. Church leaders say COVID-19 exacerbated the decline. When people couldn't gather in person during the pandemic, many churches began live-streaming worship services. But when in-person worship returned, many people didn't. People simply got out of the routine of going to church, pastors said.

A recent Gallup study found three in 10 Americans attend religious services every week, or almost every week. While 11% report attending about once a month, 56% of Americans say they seldom or never attend worship services.

Cheryl Meglio, a St. Louis realtor known as the "Church Lady," has sold church property for more than 30 years. More church properties are on the market today than in the years before the pandemic, she said.

"Since COVID, there is not as much demand for these big buildings," Meglio said. Her website lists more than 30 church properties that have sold since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.

Real estate agents across the region are advertising protestant churches for sale — in St. Louis city neighborhoods, Pagedale and Mehlville in St. Louis County, Pacific in Franklin County and House Springs in Jefferson County, among others.

Some of the church sanctuaries date back hundreds of years, but they are no longer practical as congregations shrink. And when churches go up for sale, close or move away, the ripple effects can be felt throughout a community.

"Churches are there for a lot of good reasons and churches do a lot of good work — they are heating and cooling shelters, they have food pantries, they have daycares for children," Meglio said. "They do a lot, and when those churches go away, so, too, do those services."

The St. Louis Archdiocese in 2023 sought to close or merge 30 parishes throughout the archdiocese as part of Archbishop Mitchell Rozanski's "All Things New" plan. Many of those closures were in St. Louis, a city once known as the "Rome of the West"

due to its deep Catholic faith.

Compton Heights Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), on South Grand Boulevard in St. Louis, is among those now selling property. The congregation, founded in 1894, is well known for its "Happy Friday" celebrations. Church members line South Grand with brightly-colored signs, waving to motorists and offering free coffee and hot chocolate.

"People from all over know our church because of 'Happy Fridays.' It is part of who we are and I hope that we will continue 'Happy Friday' wherever we go," said Madeline Haraway, a church elder. She said the congregation is in talks with others who might allow them to share space. They hope to make a decision in 2025, she said.

In north St. Louis County, Florissant Presbyterian Church recently moved into John Knox Presbyterian Church in Florissant. The two churches already share a pastor and are merging under a single name, Florissant Valley Presbyterian Church.

In December, the members of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in St. Ann voted to sell their property after two years of discussions and watching membership decline, said Pastor Kristen Koch.

"We knew that what we were doing wasn't sustainable, and so we needed to find a new way to do ministry," Koch said. She is now shepherding the congregation through its third move in its almost 60-year history. The congregation voted last week to move into John Calvin Presbyterian Church in nearby Bridgeton.

That move is expected to be finalized by the end of March, said Rev. Brandon Eddy, who leads the Presbyterian church. Both congregations have comparable memberships, he said, with similar worship attendance of about 50 people per Sunday.

The two groups will remain separate faith communities and will "go through a bit of musical chairs," he said, as they learn to share space.

"We are trying to take one faithful step at a time," Koch said. "We trust that God is working through this moment. We know that the church is in God's hand."

## **Saying goodbye**

For churches giving up historic spaces, it can be a rollercoaster of emotions.

"We have all gone through the seven stages of grief," said Love, the board chair.

Those feelings of grief were compounded when it was announced that the new owners of the Lockwood Avenue property — the nearby Westborough Country Club, which had sold the church the property back in the 1950s — would raze the building. The country club, which bought the property for \$2.9 million, initially planned to use the property to host private events but has since decided to leave it as green space.

The church's historic stained glass windows, produced by Emil Frei, are being taken down and put into storage. The large 15-foot cross from sculptor Hillis Arnold that was displayed in the sanctuary will likely be loaned to another congregation or a Disciples-affiliated college or institution for display.

To help say goodbye to the church before the final service on Christmas Eve, the congregation hosted a fall concert and published a book filled with photos and recollections submitted by members.

Love recalls the decades when the congregation was bursting at the seams and held three Sunday services. She also remembers the crowds that filled the fellowship hall to watch children's plays or attend youth choir performances. When she closes her eyes, she can hear the sound of the church's organ playing her favorite hymns on Sunday mornings.

"I would like to remember it as it was," she said. "It is hard enough knowing that soon the building won't be there at all."

The congregation is using \$2.5 million from the sale to create an endowment for mission work and relief projects, including food pantries, support for people living with HIV and programs for homelessness.

Webster Groves Christian Church observed its first worship service Jan. 12 at Webster Groves Baptist Church, near Big Bend Boulevard and North Laclede Station Road.

"At first, I think we all felt a little unsure of where to sit, but then once we started worship and had communion, it felt just like church," Love said. "It felt just like home."

Moore, the pastor, said attendance has increased since the move.

"This took a lot of courage for the congregation. They had to envision a future different from the past, different from the present, and different from a future that they had envisioned," he said. "In many ways, the congregation is more energetic, more hopeful, than I've ever experienced before."

The Christian Church's members are settling into the space and the Baptist congregation has allowed them to add reminders of the Lockwood Avenue building, Moore said. Especially important is a square of carpet he cut from their sanctuary, stained by "hundreds and hundreds of drops of grape juice" from years of dipping bread into juice as parishioners took communion.

"Communion is very important for us as members of the Disciples of Christ denomination," Moore said. "So there is perhaps no greater reminder of who we are as a people and where we've been than that carpet square."

Which leads to another adjustment: changing how they take communion, so as to not stain the blue carpet of their new home.

The churches stagger their services. The Christian Church congregation worships at 9 a.m., followed by Sunday School at 10 a.m. The Baptist congregation, which is part of the Cooperative Baptist Association, worships at 11:15 a.m. A third congregation, comprised of Chin immigrants from Burma, worships at 1:30 p.m.

The Christian Church and Baptist denominations have a lot in common theologically, said Pastor Terrell Carter, who leads Webster Groves Baptist Church. Both faiths allow for women to serve in ministry, believe in baptism by immersion and observe communion. There are still key differences in governance, hierarchy and stances on some cultural issues.

Despite those differences, Carter says his congregation is enjoying sharing the building. He and other members have attended the services or Sunday School classes of the Christian church.

"This is not our building. Yes, it belongs to us, but this is a building to do ministry, to build community and to help make people's lives better," Carter said. "And that is what has happened — and what is happening — at that corner in Webster Groves."

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