

Our religious buildings keep us connected

J. David McAuley

There is some validity in what Keith Knight, a member of The Mercury's community editorial board, wrote in his March 11 column, *Tear Down The Churches And Invest In People*. Churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and other faith communities are the people — not the buildings. Facilities are needed for shelter, as a home, and as symbols of our spiritual practices.

As an architect who has practised 32 years and who has designed new buildings, additions and renovations to more than 500 places of worship in Ontario, including 15 in Guelph, it would seem I have a vested interest in constructing more buildings for worship.

I am, of course, seldom retained when congregations are floundering. But I have designed new buildings to replace some of the older, deteriorating churches being closed in remote communities.

Much of my work, though, is done for growing congregations that have a strong mission, beliefs and a following of progressive, positive and cohesive people who want to be together in worship and fellowship. They enjoy music, study, food, conversation, families, the sharing of a similar life and health experiences, exercise, and the building on of experiences and traditions in a supportive safe atmosphere.

Regrettably, the architecture is not now the attraction — though it certainly can restrain new forms of multi-media worship. Traditional heritage churches built in Ontario in the previous century do not speak to the spiritual needs or worship

styles of a generation without a strong cultural or religious background. They are often located in areas where there has been a population shift, with insufficient land for growth and adequate parking. They are steeped in traditional values, with magnificent art, sound construction practices, great materials, and lost craftsmanship.

I have addressed heritage conferences on the subject of contemporary worship in historic places of worship. The reasons for the recent construction of buildings for faith communities include the inadequacies of existing buildings — such as limited space, poor layout, accessibility, excessive utility costs, lack of flexibility, structural failure, poor lighting, and the list goes on. New buildings are needed in growing neighbourhoods to meet the cultural needs for new immigrants, or because of population shifts, environmental, land development or real estate pressures. There have been many centres for spiritual worship where more than one faith community shares all or part of the facilities.

One such church campus I'm currently working with in Mississauga began with five denominations, and the two remaining ones are in the process of severing the land to build their own space.

This happens because the existing land did not meet the growth of the congregations, and demand for facilities overshadowed the space available at the same time. Sunday mornings place a huge demand on religious buildings, while for the remainder of the week the facilities remain underutilized.

Sustainable places of worship satisfy not only the spiritual needs of a community but also the social, health, mental, physical and

educational needs throughout the week. The places are vibrant, thriving centres for a wide range of needs specific to the community.

To be viable today, they must be friendly, safe and accessible community centres. As our world gets smaller, for environmental reasons, we won't be able to travel to regional centres for large community services. This is already happening as mega churches in the U.S. are closing or going to multi-venue closed circuit satellite places.

These do not, however, satisfy the human need for communal connection and socializing. A central big box mega-church for Guelph, wherever located, would probably satisfy the spiritual needs for some of the people dedicated or motivated enough to get there.

But it is unlikely it would replace all the faith groups in our community.

There are always different practices, beliefs, traditions, languages and principles which demand an architecture that speaks to the adherents and portrays an image to the public.

Just as there are schools, libraries, recreational and sports facilities, health care options, shopping centres, clubs, restaurants and workplaces spread throughout our city for convenience and choice, we need a place devoted and designed to sustain spiritual practice that is convenient, friendly, inviting and accessible to all.

A central spiritual centre would actually sever our community and create another gated institution — a bureaucracy which would underline our differences and set up disharmony.

Since pre-literate times, religious architecture and art has told messages about a

good life and promise of a better hereafter. There has been a vocabulary of form, materials, colour, symbols, images and placement which is unique to the Roman Catholic, United, Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Jewish, Salvation Army, Unitarian, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and, as Guelph has recently learned, Sikh religions.

One will see that there is a strong movement toward worship venues that offer choices of atmosphere, communication, music, drama, dance, education, conversation, prayer, devotion, meditation and the spoken word for all ages, cultures, languages and social groups, often independent of individual background.

Faith communities have always managed to fill a vital role in the support of the needy, disadvantaged, aged, unhealthy and minorities even when governments fail to care, become too bureaucratic, cumbersome, unresponsive, slow or don't have the resources.

The loss of our heritage churches would be a major loss to our connection with the past and fine buildings which cannot be replaced. But this would pale in comparison to the loss of dedicated people of faith serving our community.

Contrary to tearing down churches, as our population ages, meets life's challenges and become aware of our impermanence, we will all be looking for a haven of hope. Our refashioned and responsive faith communities will be there to sustain us and give meaning and purpose to our lives.

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