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Is abandoning a church an act of bad faith?

Congregants moving from derelict complex leave a trail of unpaid bills, taxes behind

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Witness Cathedral of Faith's previous worship site on Emslie Street sits empty, forlorn and on the brink of demolition after collecting numerous Housing Court violations and few potential buyers.

The congregation hasn't paid water bills, garbage fees or property taxes, and it owes the city \$163,000 for the costs of demolishing a former school building at the site.

But none of that prevented the small congregation from sticking together and moving on.

Witness Cathedral recently bought another large former Catholic church complex, this one a city landmark on Hertel Avenue in Black Rock.

The congregation is paying \$250,000 for the former St. John the Baptist Church, purchased in November from the Plaza Group, a local development company that bought it in 2006 from the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo. The Plaza Group has agreed to hold the mortgage in the deal with Witness Cathedral.

"This is an opportunity for us. Can we handle this? Of course we can handle it," said Elder Ronald Kirk, longtime pastor of Witness Cathedral.

Some city officials and preservationists aren't so sure, given the church's track record with the former Sacred Heart Church complex, which takes up most of a city block between Emslie and Watson streets in the old Hydraulics neighborhood.

"I would be afraid, very afraid, of what will happen there. That scares me," said David A. Franczyk, Common Council president. "If they let that one go to hell, they'll let this one go to hell, too."

In the more than 20 years the congregation owned the former Sacred Heart Church complex, Witness Cathedral and Kirk were cited numerous times for a variety of code violations.

A thick city inspections file indicates a history of neglect and disregard for the church complex, which includes a sanctuary, rectory and convent. The buildings were deemed so unsafe that Housing Court Judge Henry Nowak ordered all of them vacated in 2008.

The site also had included a large school building until January, when a wall collapsed, forcing an emergency demolition, at taxpayer expense.

But Kirk makes no apologies for his congregation's handling of the Emslie and Watson properties. He argues that they were kicked out by city officials bent on demolishing all of the buildings.

The pastor said he needed at least another five years to get the properties up to speed.

"We were in there. We were doing it. What happened was we apparently weren't moving fast enough," he said.

The buildings were in rough shape even 20 years ago, when Kirk's nonprofit organization took them over, the pastor said.

He described the congregation as being devastated and humiliated by having to move out of the church and rent space for worship in area hotels.

"We loved that place. We were displaced. We didn't know what we were going to do or how we were going to do it," he said.

Kirk also said his congregation will pay the city back for the school demolition costs "at our ability to pay it."

But some city officials acknowledged the money might never be reimbursed, and the city has limited legal ability to enforce payment from those who can't afford it.

Bruce Beyer, who owns a woodworking shop near the former Sacred Heart Church complex, has watched the site deteriorate for two decades. He figures taxpayers will get stuck with the demolition bills for the other three buildings as well.

"It's just a typical story of what will happen to all of these Catholic churches that are abandoned here on the East Side," said Beyer, who meticulously restored the building that houses his wood shop.

"It's astonishing how this works," he added. "I was outraged that the city was having to pay for the demolition costs. Clearly, the owner of the building should have been somewhat responsible for the demolition."

Beyer said he doesn't understand why church groups that build massive and beautiful church buildings haven't developed insurance plans in case the structures need to be razed.

"Somebody has to be responsible for taking them down. It can't always be the taxpayer," he said.

Preservationists fear that the Hertel Avenue church, which is in pristine condition and features intricate

terra cotta artwork inside and out, could end up like the former Sacred Heart Church.

"It's a gorgeous, gorgeous church. The church is a gem," said Timothy Tielman, executive director of the Campaign for Greater Buffalo Art, Architecture and History. "If it's not diligently maintained, it could be in a lot of trouble."

Plaza Group owner Ron Alsheimer said he was unaware of Witness Cathedral's problems on Emslie Street when he made the deal to sell the St. John the Baptist property, which includes a school and rectory.

"This is a surprise to me. It puts that loan in doubt," said Alsheimer.

Alsheimer leased the church for nearly a year to Witness Cathedral before selling it, and the congregation paid its rent on time each month, he said.

The monthly costs of owning the buildings are about the same as renting, Kirk said.

Alsheimer had considered converting St. John the Baptist into senior apartments when he bought it in 2006 for \$160,000.

Plaza Group has a track record of successful historic building conversions, but the company backed away because the project wasn't feasible without government subsidies, Alsheimer said.

"Its best use was as a church," he said.

Sacred Heart was originally a Catholic church built in the late 1800s with money from the Larkin Soap Co., which needed the parish's original land to build the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed office building that has long since been torn down.

After the Diocese of Buffalo closed the parish in 1973, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church bought the property and later struggled to maintain the buildings.

The 1983 propane explosion at a North Division Street warehouse that killed seven people blew out many of the windows in the Sacred Heart buildings.

Kirk said he stepped in to save the complex in 1988, at the urging of then-Mayor James Griffin, whom he says promised money and assistance.

"It was going to be torn down," he said. "We stepped in to try and save it. I say we could have, given more time. We weren't given more time."

But Kirk's plans to use the buildings for a community center, housing and any number of other plans never materialized.

Looking back, he said, he wouldn't have taken on the project if he knew then what he knows now.

"When we got the church, it was just like St. Matthew's," said Kirk, referring to another landmark church on East Ferry Street that fell into disrepair. "It was open to air, no doors, no windows.

"If I was to do it again, I would have never let the mayor . . . talk me into it," he said. "It was worse than St. Matthew's when we got it. To think about it, I'm crushed because the majority of my youth was spent trying to put this thing together."

Kirk said he and his congregation learned from their experiences on Emslie Street and have already made minor repairs to the former St. John the Baptist site.

When asked why they decided to take on another large church campus, Kirk again described the move as an opportunity.

"We'll max the place out. We'll be a positive in the community," he said. Besides, he asked, if his congregation didn't buy and preserve the buildings, who else would? "Would you rather nobody try to do anything and let them deteriorate?"

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