



SUCCESS
STORIES

Partners in Mission, Users of Space

Augustana opens its doors to the neighborhood

Rev. Sarah Jones

Walk into Augustana Lutheran Church in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood on any day of the week and you might have a hard time believing it's not the neighborhood community center. You'll witness local seniors participating in a memory café in the fellowship hall, a new refugee family meeting their caseworker for the first time in the hallway, hear the voices of the local theater troupe rehearsing in the library, see an inspiring art installation in the sanctuary, experience a neighbor donating new food items to the Love Fridge...and that's just on the first floor! Over 60 community groups use Augustana Lutheran's facilities every year on a regular basis, each serving local residents of different ages, backgrounds, interests, and needs. Almost everyone in the Hyde Park neighborhood knows Augustana Lutheran Church because they have opened their doors, rooms, offices and every space possible to connect with the community. Every corner of the building lives up to Augustana's mission to be "a place to learn, work, share, find fellowship, and build peace."

This wasn't always the case. When Rev. Nancy Goede was installed as pastor in 2016, the building was almost completely empty and the congregation was struggling to keep up with the occupancy and mortgage expenses. They were exhausted and there was little capacity to even think about outreach and mission. Pastor Goede and a few lay leaders realized that the key to both congregational vitality and mission impact might be the building itself. "There was a growing realization that our call as a Lutheran church in this neighborhood was to build partnerships," Pastor Goede says. Augustana is located only a couple of blocks from the University of Chicago and in the same neighborhood as five seminaries (including the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago) - many new members and local residents are in a transitional stage of life and don't stay more than a few years. Apart from the Lutheran Campus Ministry (LuMin) partner that Augustana hosts, it had been difficult for the congregation to



University of Chicago students help seniors learn to navigate new technology and software at Augustana Lutheran Church. The "Tech Savvy Seniors" program is run through the Hyde Park Village – a local service organization for seniors. Photo credit: Chicago Hyde Park Village



Augustana Lutheran Church's sanctuary is a flexible space that is used for concerts, dramatic performances, recitals, and art installations. The church removes religious iconography to help accommodate secular uses. Photo credit: The Chicago Architecture Center

sustain community-serving programs that they started. Pastor Nancy and the leaders of Augustana were coming to the realization that even though the congregation couldn't provide services to the community in their building, other groups could.

Starting with the Chicago Hyde Park Village (a local senior services organization), Augustana began inviting neighborhood groups to use their facilities for workshops, meetings, and other programs. Word spread and soon the church began receiving more and more requests to use the space. "We didn't really have a vision at first...my inclination

was just to open up the building to anyone who asked to use it," says Pastor Nancy. That was a big ask for the congregation, who (like many churches) had a few negative experiences with space-sharing partnerships in the past. But they kept saying, "yes," and have seen how that allows the church to serve hundreds, if not thousands, of people each year. The church continues to say "yes," to requests - most recently to an urgent ask by the Hyde Park Refugee Project to host their kids' day camp in the building after their planned-on location fell through just weeks before the start of summer. "It will be tight," says Jim Vondracek, the congregation's parish and facilities administrator. "But we're going to make it work - it's an important program for this community."

The parish administrator is largely responsible for coordinating groups who use Augustana's facilities. He estimates that he spends 60% of his time supporting Augustana-led programs and activities and 40% on supporting the space-sharing ministry. The church realized that they needed to dedicate a large portion of staff time to the management of partnerships in the building, a lesson that Pastor Goede hopes others take to heart. There needs to be staff support for managing both the worshipping community and for the other folks who call Augustana home. This attention to space-sharing partnerships has allowed Augustana to both expand their presence and mission in Hyde Park and to sustain that mission by creating a revenue stream to maintain the facilities: Augustana brings in \$60,000 a year from its partners who contribute a small fee, much lower than market rate for their use of the facilities, which accounts for 88% of the church's annual building expenses. With those expenses mostly covered, more of the parishioners' gifts can go towards parish programming and operations. In

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early 2025, the church was awarded a competitive grant from the City of Chicago to re-do the roof and install solar panels; Augustana was able to successfully demonstrate how the new solar panels were not just for the benefit of the 200 members, but for all the programs and participants that the church supports through the use of their building.

While many churches might see sharing their space as primarily an opportunity to increase revenue, Pastor Goede would advise them to look at it differently. "You'll make some money, yes," says Pastor Goede. "But the primary reason to share the building is to partner with and serve the community." She has seen how opening the church doors has changed the church's profile and possibilities - now the wider community of Hyde Park knows who Augustana is and what the church

cares about. "When they need to call upon a Church, we're there." Pastor Goede also understands the desire of some smaller churches to sell their buildings, and she hopes that those congregations seriously consider what they would be losing. "Your building and what you do with it is a tangible witness to the community - what your church is about, what the ELCA is about," she says. "Our mission is to 'serve God and serve others,' the building helps us do both."



Members of Augustana Lutheran Church in Chicago install a "Love Fridge" where community members can donate or take perishable and non-perishable foods. The church's entire campus serves the neighborhood as an extension of Augustana's mission. Photo credit: Augustana Lutheran Church

Property Stewardship Lessons

- Understand and manage your property as an asset that can enhance your mission
- Try as hard as you can to say "yes" to space-use requests.
- Ask for a fee to ensure that sharing your space is a sustainable practice
- Dedicate staff to managing and fostering space-use partnerships

Questions or resource requests? Contact us at CPRH@elca.org.

