



SUCCESS
STORIES

From Fallow Field to a Wildflower Garden

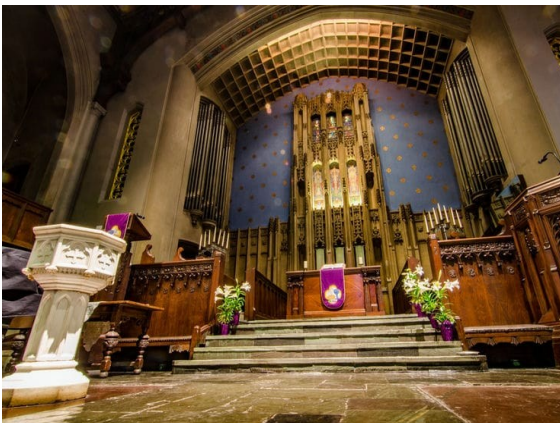
First Presbyterian Cultivates a Community of Artists

Rev. Sarah Jones

If you were to walk past the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago ("First Church") five years ago, your immediate impression might be that it was just a hollow reminder of a once-thriving church. There were holes in the sanctuary's stained-glass windows, an overgrown adjacent lawn with dried up flowers, and the enormous building was empty just about every day of the week. But when Rev. David Black first came to First Presbyterian Church of Chicago in 2020, he saw potential just waiting to be tapped. Pastor Black was coming to the South Side of Chicago from New York City, where he had been on staff at Judson Memorial Church; Judson, as it's known to its neighbors, had been transformed into a vibrant arts hub in Manhattan, serving artists of every medium and inspiration. "In churches I usually saw high institutional art," Pastor Black says. "Judson embraced those at the fringe... it illuminated how embracing the fullness of artists does so much for our theological imagination."



Students with 773 Dance Project practice in First Presbyterian's gym. 773 Dance Project provides dance instruction to kids and adults on the South Side of Chicago. Photo Credit: 773 Dance Project



First Presbyterian Church of Chicago uses its sanctuary to host concerts, art installations, and lectures. This space is one of the most used in the entire building by artists and other partners. Photo Credit: Chicago Architecture Center

Though they may not be immediately obvious, artists are natural partners for congregations with excess space. Not only do artists have the imagination and resourcefulness to use buildings in a different way, they are often in need of local, affordable space to create, rehearse, exhibit, and perform. Churches often have the kinds of spaces artists need, though congregations may not immediately think of that possibility. First Presbyterian Church of Chicago (or "First Church") had three floors of unused classrooms and offices, four performance spaces, a gym, and a commercial-grade kitchen. While many people saw these underutilized rooms as a sad reminder of the church's past self, Pastor Black saw the opening to do what Judson did and become a home for artists.



Paintings by Messejah Washington are displayed in First Presbyterian's narthex. Washington is one the many Artists in Residence who both create and exhibit in the church. Photo credit: Sarah Jones

It didn't take long for the Spirit to affirm Pastor Black's vision. One warm day in 2021, an interdisciplinary artist named Max Li decided to bike to a cemetery on the South Side, and his route took him by First Church. He was struck by the church's gothic-style architecture and had stopped to take photographs when Pastor Black walked out the door. "He immediately invited me for a tour of the building," says Li. As Li walked through the halls of building, he was dumbstruck by the amount and quality of the spaces - he happened to be in the market for a low-cost studio and soon became the first "Artist in Residence" at the church. "The church was in

great shape, it was just frozen," says Li. Li began bringing in other artists and friends as subjects for his tin-type photography project and gave each one a similar tour of the facilities and they were similarly awe-struck. Over the span of several months, artists of many disciplines began activating all of the spaces in the building - from dance classes to oil painting to concerts.

First Church is now a bustling building that is alive with volunteers, artists, and community programs seven days a week. In addition to individual artists, the church is home to two weekly feeding programs, an arts nonprofit serving differently abled adults, and a food entrepreneur who manages the kitchen. The majority of these users found the church through their relationships with Pastor Black and Li, other artists, and through friends' word of mouth. In April 2025, the church was a venue for Art EXPO week in Chicago and over 1000 visitors came through the doors for curated openings, fashion shows, house music concerts, and other events that breathed creative life into the building. Chicago's public radio station and local news outlets are excited to share their story as an inspirational example of how churches and artists can create mutually beneficial partnerships.

Relationships with artists and local community groups have created an economy of reciprocity within the church and have expanded not just the reach of the church's mission, but the capacity of the individual partners. Artists are inherently collaborative and often trade their skills and connect their friends. One artist, who designs and makes clothing, helped repair one of the church's torn stage curtains. Chef Dozzy, who manages the kitchen, collaborated with church members and the local food distribution group to create a Sunday Rice community dinner once a month.



A violinist performs in First Presbyterian Church's former parlor. In 2022, the church received a grant to renovate the parlor into a performance and collaboration space for artists. Phot Credit: First Presbyterian Church of Chicago

Li and other artists create art for worship services and hold classes for church members. First Church is collaborating with some of its partners to write a grant that will help restore the community greenhouse on their lot.

For Pastor Black, the contrast between the church now and when he first arrived is stark. He describes the church he arrived at as a “fallow field.” “Five percent of the building was used 5% of the week by 26 members who had been through a rough decade,” Black says. “There were no policies, no manuals. The church had a name, but the institution had died. All this growth has been from that death.” He sees the death of the institution as creating the possibility for new life, just as dying plants regenerate the soil. “We just started planting a garden with the artists, and now we’re seeing what thrives in this community.” The

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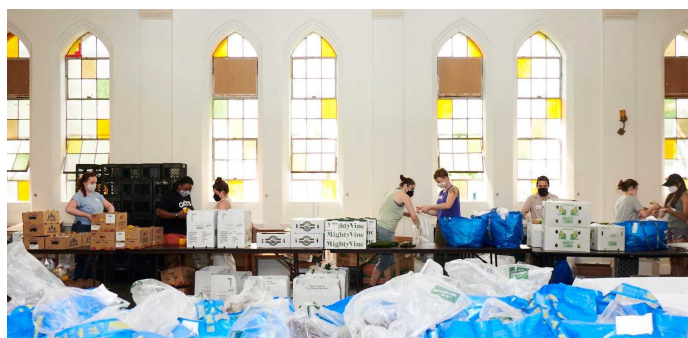
they’re here to be ironic. But they keep coming back, and they join the church.” Like wildflower seeds being blown on the wind, folks of all backgrounds are finding a home in the building and the church is blooming with a diversity of possibilities.

Max Li offers a different metaphor to describe his experience of First Church’s transformation. “There’s a proverb in which an emperor asks four blind sages to tell him what an elephant is – they can only describe it in parts.” Li sees the artists, the congregation, and the other building users as all bringing specific vision to the church’s purpose. “When we stay within our own disciplines, we can only understand what is in front of us. We need each other to see the bigger picture.” Max’s part of that vision has made him an advocate for church-artist partnerships.



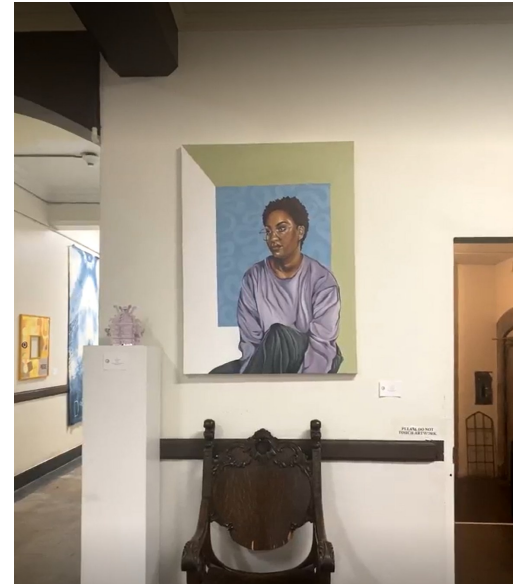
Credentis” – a play created by local artists around Tarot Card readings – used First Presbyterian’s stage and fellowship hall for performances. Performers activate multiple spaces within the church on a regular basis. Photo Credit: Hyde Park Herald

artists and building are definitely thriving, and the congregation is being transformed thanks to the church’s new life as an arts hub. As with the artists, First Church is becoming new by attracting less traditional members. “In Sunday worship, we get some visitors who are lifelong Presbyterians, but they often disappear. We also get people who have never been to church in their lives...They’re here to be tourists, or



Volunteers with Market Box – a mutual aid food distribution program – package deliveries in First Presbyterian’s fellowship hall. First Presbyterian partners with multiple food service and justice groups that use the building every week. Photo Credit: First Presbyterian Church

Li is now the “Arts Czar” of First Church and the primary cultivator of partnerships in the building. Although most of the building users, including Li, do not identify as Christian or attend Sunday Service, they see themselves part of larger church community and are inspired by their own piece of a larger vision.



Max Li, First Presbyterian’s Arts Czar, has transformed every nook and cranny into gallery space. Microexhibitions” are tucked into the stairwells in the sanctuary building. Photo credits: Sarah Jones and First Presbyterian Church Chicago

As First Presbyterian’s profile continues to grow in Chicago, Pastor Black and Li are often asked for advice from other congregations seeking new life and transformation for their old, empty buildings. Pastor Black tells them to release their grip on their past selves – to let go and let God. “God has a plan for churches right now,” Pastor Black says, “we’re not really in control. The church isn’t ours, and it never was.” Pastor Black hopes that more congregations lean into their discomfort about sharing space and embrace the imagination of artists, just as First Church has.

Property Stewardship Lessons

- Engage artists as space-users, community connectors and vision partners
- Think creatively about who a “member” of your church can be -- who can also call your building home
- Pay attention to the Spirit! Follow the imagination of the congregation and your neighbors.

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

