



STORIES FROM THE SPECTRUM OF SUCCESS

Partners in Mission, Users of Space

By: Rev. Sarah Jones

Augustana opens its doors to the neighborhood

Walk into Augustana Lutheran Church in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood on any day of the week and you might mistake it for the neighborhood community center. Seniors attending a memory café in the fellowship hall, a new refugee family meeting their caseworker for the first time in the hallway, a neighbor donating new food items to the "Love Fridge," a local theater troupe rehearsing in the library, an inspiring art installation in the sanctuary ... and that's just on the first floor!

Over 60 community groups use Augustana'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 because it has opened its doors, its rooms, its offices and every space possible to connect with its 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. Augustana is located only a couple blocks from the University of Chicago, in the same neighborhood as five seminaries (including the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago). Many members are in transitional stages of life and don't stay more than a few years. Apart from hosting Lutheran Campus Ministry (LuMin), Augustana had trouble sustaining community-service programs it started. When the Rev. Nancy Goede was installed as pastor in 2016, the building was almost empty and the congregation was struggling to keep up with occupancy and mortgage expenses. The members were exhausted, with 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, that even though the congregation couldn't provide services to the community from its building, other groups could.



University of Chicago students help seniors navigate new technology at Augustana Lutheran Church. The [Tech Savvy Friends](#) program is run through Chicago Hyde Park Village – a local service organization for seniors. Photo: Chicago Hyde Park Village



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

"There was a growing realization that our call as a Lutheran church in this neighborhood was to build partnerships," she recalls. Starting with Chicago Hyde Park Village, a local senior services organization, Augustana began inviting neighborhood groups to use its facilities for workshops, meetings and other programs.

Word spread, and the church received more requests to use its space. "We didn't really have a vision at first," says Pastor Goede. "My inclination was just to open up the building to anyone who asked to use it." That was a big ask for the congregation, which (like many churches) remembered a

few negative experiences with past space-sharing partnerships. But they kept saying yes to outside groups 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 from the Hyde Park Refugee Project to host its kids' day camp in the building after the 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 the groups that use Augustana's facilities. Vondracek estimates that he spends 60% of his time supporting Augustana-led programs and activities and 40% supporting the space-sharing ministry. The church realized that it needed to dedicate a large portion of staff time to the management of partnerships in the building, a lesson that Pastor Goede hopes others will take to heart. There needs to be staff support for managing both the worshipping community and the other folks who call Augustana home.

"Your building, and what you do with it, is a tangible witness to the community."

Rev. Nancy Goede

The attention to space-sharing partnerships has allowed Augustana to expand both its presence and its mission in Hyde Park, and to sustain that mission by creating a revenue stream to maintain the facilities. The church collects \$60,000 a year from its partners, who contribute a small fee, much lower than market rate, for their use of the facilities. That \$60,000 accounts for 88% of the church's annual building expenses. With those expenses mostly covered, more of the parishioners' gifts can go toward parish programming and operations.

Community partnerships can pay off in unexpected ways. In early 2025, Augustana was awarded a competitive grant from the City of Chicago to replace its roof and install solar panels; in the application, the congregation pointed out that the solar panels would benefit not only its 200 members but all the programs and participants that the church supports through its building.

Though many churches might see sharing their space primarily as an opportunity to increase revenue, Pastor Goede advises them to look at it differently. “You’ll make some money, yes,” she says. “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 Hyde Park community knows about Augustana and what it cares about. “When they need to call upon a church, we’re there.” Pastor Goede understands the desire of some smaller churches to sell their buildings, yet she urges them to consider what they might 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 nonperishable foods. The church’s entire campus serves the neighborhood as an extension of Augustana’s mission. Photo: 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 and ask for a fee to ensure that sharing your space will be a sustainable practice.
- Dedicate staff to managing and fostering space-use partnerships.

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