



SUCCESS
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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.”

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.

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.



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



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

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 would give 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. 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 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 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.

"We just started planting a garden with the artists, and now we're seeing what thrives in this community."

Rev. David Black



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

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. 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.

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.



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Flexible and Grounded

LuMin Austin transforms its property to endow its mission

Rev. Sarah Jones

If you happen to walk through the University of Texas' Austin campus on a Tuesday evening, you might see a long line of students snaking around the block at 21st Street and San Antonio. They are a multi-cultural and diverse cross-section of UT Austin's community, and they're lining up, no matter the weather, for one of the most popular weekly events: Lutheran Campus Ministry's ("LuMin Austin") Tailgate Tuesdays. Moving to the front of the line you'll find Pastor Brad Fuerst on the grill, flipping sizzling patties with a chef's ease and an emcee's enthusiasm. LuMin Austin's students are walking down the line, taking folks' orders and chatting. Over a hundred students walk away each Tuesday with their bellies full and their spirits high. "It's the best burger on campus," says Pastor Brad proudly. "The students don't just get to eat, they get to eat good."



LuMin students and Pastor Brad Fuerst at their grill stations on Tailgate Tuesday. LuMin Austin feeds over 100 UT Austin students and other neighbors every week. Photo credit: LuMin Austin

LuMin Austin provides the Tailgate Tuesday meal as part of their greater feeding ministry for the students, staff, and other residents of the UT Austin campus. Forty-seven percent of the student body is food insecure -- a need that goes largely unaddressed by the University itself. In addition to the Tuesday meals, LuMin provides a food pantry for students, and the food flies off the shelves. The number and diversity of students who benefit from LuMin's feeding programs is far larger and wider than the students that are a part of the worship and Bible study activities, but the students LuMin serves learn that the campus ministry cares about them - even if they're not Lutheran or Christian. "We get a lot of international students," says Pastor Brad. "That opens up a whole new possibility for ministry - opportunities to offer space and support for the Hindu students, Sikh students, and others that don't have a dedicated campus ministry or advocacy group."

LuMin Austin's impressive outreach and service comes from a deep sense of place in the UT Austin campus and a commitment to the student population. The campus ministry has been located at 21st Street and San Antonio for decades.



In 2012, LuMin Austin traded their Lutheran Center building for a ground-level space in a high-rise student housing building. The transformation of their property has allowed LuMin Austin the flexibility and stability to meet student needs. Photo Credits: Ion Austin

While at one time that put them on the outskirts of campus, today they are located in and among student housing. "This is a main corridor for students," says Pastor Brad. "We're embedded in their neighborhood...we've never had to advertise Tailgate Tuesdays; students learn about it when they're just walking by." While the feeding ministry has been active for over a decade, the real turning point came during the COVID pandemic. Students were unable or hesitant to come indoors for a meal, so Pastor Brad and the LuMin Austin students began serving outside. Word spread, and soon LuMin Austin saw lines of hungry students down the block. Over the past four years they've

experimented with different kinds of food, like tacos, spaghetti, you name it. "We asked the students what they liked, what they wanted more of," says Pastor Brad. "The clear winner was burgers." Pastor Brad is now raising funds to upgrade LuMin's kitchen to be commercially certified and increase its capacity to serve hundreds of burgers a week, for hundreds of students.

Another key factor in LuMin's success is something they lack - a big old building that demands time and money. LuMin is located in the ground level of a high-rise building that has the capacity to house over 500 students. While LuMin holds the property title, they have ground-leased the land to the Scion Group, a property development and management company. Scion Group pays LuMin \$100,000 a year and manages all property maintenance and upkeep. LuMin is able to use that money to fund its ministries and focus on its outreach and presence to the UT Austin campus community. The LuMin location, at the ground level of a housing building, is a valuable asset. Close to where the students are, they have a neutral, flexible, and welcoming space. LuMin Austin's space can easily be configured into a worship space, a dining room, a food pantry, a "hang out" location, and much, much more. It's a space built for the students that transforms along with the campus community - serving unimagined needs as they arise.

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Pastor Brad Fuerst

As is common in ministry, before 2010, the LuMin Austin chapter shared a more traditional church building that they co-managed with the Missouri Synod campus ministry.

In 2008, the city of Austin re-zoned much of the West Campus area to allow high-rise developments in an effort to consolidate student housing within the walkable UT campus area. Suddenly, the property LuMin Austin was on became a hot commodity. LuMin Austin had an opportunity to trade in their building for a large source of income that could create and sustain amazing ministry. Rev. Paul Collinson-Streng (then Pastor at LuMin Austin) describes the discernment process as collaborative, faithful, and extensive. “We were considering several options,” says Pastor Collinson-Streng. “Do we sell and move to a land-less ministry? Do we develop? Do we hang onto the building?”

Ultimately, it was LuMin Austin’s sense of place and service that was the deciding factor. “We were one block from campus, and we felt it would be a shame to give that up. If we sold the land, we would no longer have an anchor in the community we’re called to serve. So then the discussion became what was the ‘highest and best use’ of the land for our mission – and housing was the answer.”

They convened a Board of local volunteers with experience in real estate, asset-management, and real estate law. Additionally, they involved LuMin Austin students, who had an equal voice in the discernment and development process. Several student-housing developers were explored and they found a partner that fit their vision – a ground lease of the property with the opportunity for LuMin Austin and the Missouri Synod campus ministry to lease back space on the ground floor. The two campus ministries would have full design and management oversight of their space. They moved into their new spaces in 2016 – six years after LuMin Austin began the discernment process.

A decade later, the foresight of Pastor Collinson-Streng and his LuMin Board has paid off in incredible ways. Pastor Brad is thankful for the flexibility and capacity that the deal with the developers has created for the current iteration of LuMin Austin but is also thinking about how to set the campus ministry up for success when they re-negotiate the lease. “There isn’t a lot of affordable housing in this building,” says Pastor Brad. He wants to make sure that the deal increases the number of affordable units for students, even if that means that LuMin will receive less money in the annual ground-lease payment. “This place has to be a manifestation of the Kingdom that Christ describes in Luke. If the space does not reflect that sermon, then it’s just a cash cow for the church and not for the glory of God.”



LuMin Austin’s flexible ground-floor space includes a lounge area, gathering/worship area, and a kitchen. This new space can be configured for large dinners, study groups, a food pantry, and even a Christmas Pageant. Photo Credit: LuMin Austin



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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

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

Rev. Nancy Goede

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.

