

Five churches, one building? Good stewardship: Good stewardship

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

In the story of David and Goliath, Saul famously insisted that David be outfitted in his own kingly armor. While this was a generous gesture, David found that he could hardly move. Rejecting the clunky armor, David retrieved five smooth stones for his sling.

Many North American congregations are like David, limited by the armor of previous generations—namely, impressive church buildings that are much-loved symbols of the church's history and role in the community but are now a liability. Often the mission of such churches becomes mainly that of maintaining the building, updating it to meet safety and accessibility requirements and paying the rising cost of heating—all with the resources of a declining membership.

University Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Seattle has been facing this challenge. Built in stages in 1915, 1928 and 1959, the multistory, neo-Gothic building stands at a busy corner in Seattle's University District. The church's sanctuary has the capacity to seat 1,300, but today the congregation's aging membership stands at 240. Most Sundays, attendance doesn't hit 100.

University Christian is part of a coalition of five congregations in Seattle's University District—including University Lutheran, University Baptist, Christ Episcopal and University Temple United Methodist—that are attempting to outfit themselves anew by coming together to share one facility adjacent to the University of Washington.

The conversations that have given rise to the University District Ecumenical Campus Coalition (UDECC) began in February 2004 when 150 people from ten neighborhood churches came together for what was termed the Ultimate Potluck. These churches have a longstanding cooperative relationship. They have shared worship and speakers and have worked together in ministries of service, reaching out to vulnerable populations in their neighborhood.

At the Ultimate Potluck, the congregations discovered a common denominator: all were land rich but cash poor. As Jack Olive, then the senior minister at University Temple, points out, “The churches of the University District are the second biggest property owner in the district after the University of Washington.”

“Alone the congregations were experiencing scarcity,” says Clint Pehrson, a Seattle architect and member of University Lutheran who is executive director of UDECC. “But together that scarcity was, at least potentially, an abundance.” Together the congregations owned a significant amount of strategically located property with a combined value of well over \$100 million. Together they ran some of the most important ministries in their neighborhood. Could they find a better way to function in their transitional neighborhood, one that has been targeted by city planners as one of the three “regional growth centers” for Seattle?

While the feasibility study will not be complete until later this year, the preliminary vision imagines the Ecumenical Campus at the site of the present University Temple. According to Pehrson, as many as five different worship spaces might be configured for congregations with attendance ranging from 80 to 320. In addition, there would be one large sanctuary—the current one of University Temple—that would be suitable for the worship of all the congregations together. The vision does not entail uniting five congregations into one. Each would continue its own life and bring the particular gifts of its denomination and theological heritage into the mix. Pehrson does imagine a common baptismal font, standing somewhere at the center of the campus, to remind the congregations that “we are not baptized into the Lutheran or Episcopal church, but into Christ.”

The campus would provide ample space for a variety of church-supported human services now scattered throughout the University District and possibly some retail space and a park. The worship spaces would double as assembly spaces for civic and arts functions, following the model of Town Hall of Seattle, created in the mid-1990s when a large Christian Science church near Seattle’s downtown was converted into a vibrant civic and arts facility. (Pehrson was one of Town Hall’s founders.)

The ecumenical property would be managed by a separate not-for-profit entity. The intent would be to free individual churches from property-management issues so they would be better able to focus on missions.

Longtime ecumenical leader Tom Quigley, a member of University Christian, sees the Ecumenical Campus as “harvesting the fruits of the ecumenical movement.” Ron Moe-Lobeda, pastor of University Lutheran, sees the Ecumenical Campus also as “saying something different, and really compelling, about the church, and doing so in a way that is visible and tangible. So many people I speak with, in the community, on the soccer field and other places, would like to be part of a faith community, but they aren’t interested in all the conflict.” The Ecumenical Campus Coalition promises to transcend some of the historic divisions and conflict to form a new unity.

But it may have been far easier for David to shed Saul’s armor than for historic churches to surrender their buildings. “Perhaps the toughest challenge,” says Olive, “will be the property issues. How can multiple congregations sell property at roughly the same time, have sufficient guarantees as they do so and have everyone reach agreement about what each of the different congregations puts into the common pot? It’s a daunting logistical task.”

The property sales questions are not the only daunting ones. “One of the largest problems,” comments Hubert Locke, former dean of the university’s School of Public Affairs and member of University Christian, “is that you have people [in congregations] being asked to work up enthusiasm for something that many of them, because of their age, are not likely ever to see.”

Many of the most challenging issues are pastoral. Elderly church members may find it difficult to relinquish the church building they have known all their lives. Some may wonder if the church still cares about them. Still, says Locke, UDECC “may be the only way that mainline churches in this kind of geographic setting can plan any kind of decent future for themselves.”

While the concept of a shared church campus, strategically located near the university, mass transit and residential neighborhoods, is an exciting one, anyone who has been involved in a congregation knows how challenging it is to get one congregation to make major decisions, much less manage such a process for a half-dozen simultaneously.

The decision-making time for the congregations is fast approaching. The current timeline calls for the completion of a feasibility study in fall 2008, followed by a four-month commitment phase, during which each of the congregations and campus ministries reaches its own decision about whether to commit to the project. If such

commitments are made, construction would begin late in 2010 and be completed in the spring of 2012.

Besides foreseeing a relief from building management tasks, the congregations envision benefits from common programming, particularly in the area of adult education. There has been talk of a shared lay school of theology under the name “Questions of Faith Institute.” UDECC could even become a kind of urban monastery—a center of rich and diverse spiritual life with porous boundaries to the neighborhood and university.

Do these steps indicate a vibrant future for these congregations? Or is this project simply a survival strategy on the road to decline? Pehrson hopes that UDECC will mean new vitality for these historic mainline congregations. “Part of the strategy here is for these congregations to be better known by creating a new story about who they are. That story could be one of community to the power of three.” By that, Pehrson means that UDECC would be a community of communities playing an important role in the district and the city.

The project creates yet more questions: What kind of leadership will there be or should there be for the common life of UDECC? How will that leadership shape the vision and voice of the emerging entity?

Another issue is whether congregations that understand mission almost exclusively as projects of service and justice will be able to reach out and engage in Christian formation. These congregations, like many mainline congregations, do yeoman’s work in offering shelter for youths, food programs, low-cost housing, justice advocacy and interfaith dialogue. What they do not do as well, in the largely unchurched or dechurched population of Seattle, is form people in the faith. Can beginners in the faith learn the biblical stories and the practice of prayer and experience God in life-changing ways at UDECC? Without some intentional development of formational and evangelistic ministries, it will be hard to reverse the membership decline that is, in some measure, driving the UDECC venture forward. To put it another way: without a clear and compelling call to arms, different armor may not make a difference.