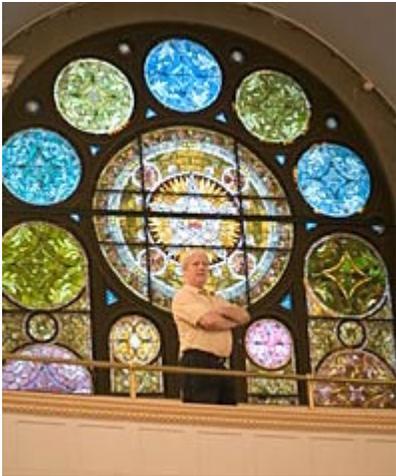


Joachim's Temptation

Upper West Side Baptists pray for real-estate guidance while façade-worshipping neighbors fret.

- By Arianne Cohen



(Photo: Todd Selby)

The stranger came uninvited to the First Baptist Church on West 79th Street last spring. He was a real-estate developer, and he had an offer: Let us replace your exuberant 1894 Romanesque edifice and build something more practical. The church would share ownership and space in a new, fourteen-story condo, and get an eight-figure cash payout to boot. Thus began the great temptation of W. Lawrence Joachim, president of the church's board of trustees. "The proposal's basic concept was a residential condo building with retail space and the church in between," says Joachim. He declined. But the developer returned this summer with a revised plan. Six additional real-estate companies have also approached to give advice.

Among other things, Joachim worries about the effect of buckets of cash on a church, which has about 180 members (not enough to fill its 800 pews; a Korean church and Redeemer Presbyterian share the space). "We have plenty of chapel room, but the office and classroom space leave something to be desired," he says. "And a gym and a soup kitchen might be nice to have."

"We've been praying for months about this," he says. "We're emphasizing prayer rather than discussion, because we believe that we need to set aside self-will. We need to follow His will." His neighbors fear for the loss of yet another piece of their historic paradise. The Citizens Emergency Committee to Preserve Preservation is meeting; its goal is to have the church landmarked, precluding redevelopment. "I've received three dozen calls and e-mails just this week" to preserve the church, says Councilwoman Gale Brewer. Last month, three community representatives were caught trying to spy on a private church meeting, upsetting Joachim.

First Baptist is not alone in its real-estate tribulations. Across the city, congregations trapped in the financial purgatory of dwindling memberships and rising costs are deciding that church-condos might fall within the bounds of Christ's wishes. "Developers are literally going from religious institution to religious institution, asking if they can buy their building as a development site," says Peg Breen, the president of the New York

Landmarks Conservancy. And First Baptist is across the street from the Apthorp, which sold last week for over \$425 million.

Joachim joined the Baptist congregation in 1976, after graduating from Princeton and law school. “When I joined, the deacons used to grill you a bit. They’d say, ‘Can you recite a Scripture that lets you know that you have eternal life?’ It’s a little easier now.” He’s married to a Jewish woman. (“Not a good idea,” he deadpans.) “Landmarking, it seems to me, is a disaster,” he says. It becomes more expensive and cumbersome to repair the building, much less replace it. Nonetheless, last week the commission rushed the church into emergency landmark review. Joachim is unmoved. “For us, the building is a vehicle for ministry, not an end unto itself. And it may happen that we would change our use of the property.”

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