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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: UPPER WEST SIDE; With Bowed Heads, A Flock Looks Warily Ahead

By ALEX MINDLIN

The First Baptist Church in the City of New York occupies one of Broadway's most striking buildings: a huge, turreted, red-roofed structure topped by a pair of mismatched towers. The building faces Broadway at an angle, creating an inviting little piazza at the northwest corner of 79th Street.

First Baptist has long seemed an essential part of Upper Broadway, as much a part of the street's image as the Beaux-Arts Ansonia. But last Sunday, in a closed meeting, the church's leadership presented its congregation with several proposals to alter or replace the building.

In an interview, W. Lawrence Joachim, president of the church's board of trustees, said that the building, which was constructed in 1894, did not have enough classrooms, office space or amenities for the 180-member congregation.

"A couple of people have come forward with some serious ideas that we've been praying about for months," he added.

Mr. Joachim would give few details about the proposals, which he said are preliminary. But in describing one of them, he called the church's Italian Romanesque facade "an obvious portion that might be movable," leaving space for another building on the same lot.

He also said that the trustees had discussed the pros and cons of commercial tenants, like Starbucks, for a ground-floor retail space, presumably in a new building.

Local officials and preservationists were alarmed by the news and offered to work with the church.

Gale Brewer, the local councilwoman, said that she had received calls from distraught congregants at First Baptist and that if the church was short on cash, she and others might be able to help it raise money.

"We want to be supportive of the institution, but we also don't want to lose our landmarks, in the generic sense," she said.

The church is not an official city landmark. Kate Wood, executive director of the preservation group Landmark West, said that in the past her group had asked the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to consider designating First Baptist as a landmark, but that the commission had never begun the process.

As for the congregation, Ms. Wood said, "While it hasn't been very enthusiastic about the possibility of landmark designation, it has been a very attentive steward of the church."

In a letter to Ms. Brewer and others last week, Mr. Joachim said that the congregation had spent at least \$640,000 on improvements to the property in recent years, but that it saw the building as "a vehicle for ministry, not an end unto itself."

He wrote, "It is not surprising that our neighbors might be more interested in the views out their window than in anything God might want."

And he served notice that "it may happen in the near or distant future that we would be led to change our use of the property." ALEX MINDLIN