

Case for Renovation of Church Basement and Entrance

Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA

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Grace Church is blessed with an historic church building, an architectural and churchly gem on the edge of an historic, colonial downtown that is experiencing much new vitality and development. In recent years Grace has renewed the nave and narthex, the main spaces we use for gathering and worship, and undertaken restoration of its historic windows and care of the stonework and roofs. The basement (auditorium, library, classrooms, storage, restrooms, stage) is also increasingly outdated and in need of reconfiguration to meet ministry needs. A list of obvious issues includes:

- Asbestos floor tiles popping; carpet worn out.
- Corner restroom walls crumbling.
- Very limited kitchen/refreshment facilities.
- Classrooms are very small, with much wasted space in hallway and “open storage”
- Stage area used very infrequently as stage. Awkward placement of Men’s restroom on stage.
- Aging elevator nearing end of life.
- Elevator drop-off point often has no parking, cannot enforce.
- Elevator does not reach balcony or main restrooms (which have steps to enter).
- Traveling down to and then through church basement to Ed. Building a navigational challenge for all

While we have taken good care of the historic exterior and worship spaces of Grace, our Education Building has also long been a concern, since we know that it requires significant renovations in order to serve us well into a new century. Because of its liabilities, our architects’ recommendations have long been to stop “throwing good money after bad” and rebuild something new and current instead of continuing to repair and renovate a building with so many difficulties. But the vibrancy of current ministries housed in that building, especially Grace Place Learning Center, our neighborhood outreach through the Wed Community Meal, and numerous NA functions have kept us - until now - from considering this option seriously, since demolition would force those ministries to find new homes.

Looking Ahead

Over the past two years, our Renovations Team has been meeting with MM Architects to go through the results of the planning process from five years ago with the goal of finalizing the most important projects and developing a scope of work for a capital campaign. Through these meetings we have developed plans with three major projects, the first two of which must be undertaken before the third can be. Renovating the basement, and constructing a new, accessible entrance and elevator are the two projects which will allow the key activities of Sunday mornings – worship, education and fellowship – to occur in closer proximity and in spaces more conducive to their purpose, with accessibility for all ages.

The Benefits of Renovating

What's the benefit of that? Bringing classrooms and nursery spaces back under the nave would bring almost all of our Sunday education activities to take place there, making it much easier for families with children to worship with children nearby in nursery care, or to attend education groups with their children nearby in classes. (Parents are less tolerant of being far away from young children, or sending them off into confusing spaces, especially at first)

For this to happen, functional space will be gained by enlarging the classrooms along the south wall, eliminating the hallway, installing a kitchenette and creating updated and accessible restrooms on floor level. Creative storage solutions can be integrated in new ways, and electrical, plumbing and HVAC systems will be updated to serve us safely for years to come. All this will create a clean fresh and modern facility for activities designed to help us grow in faith and understanding and in the relationships that bind a community and make it strong, with love, joy and laughter in abundance, and support and comfort ready and waiting for those in need.

An accessible entrance and elevator will address a final "gap" in our facilities plan – how to make the whole building truly accessible for those with physical and age-related conditions that make steps, dark hallways and old restrooms into barriers that preclude participation.

And finally, undertaking these renovations will free us to pursue the vision we are exploring and refining even now: to replace our aging education building with a "Tower of Grace" with community space, kitchen, offices, child care, and a housing capacity that could transform our block and neighborhood, and provide a vital ministry engage church and community for generations to come!