



The Cathedral Church of St. Paul, the Cathedral and liturgical center of the Episcopal Diocese of Iowa, is a vital metropolitan Christian community. We are committed to accepting and giving Christ's unconditional love through worship, fellowship, education, and service within and beyond our parish church.

Undercroft vision: Conversations summary

May 13, 2020

In February there were four opportunities for St. Paul's parishioners to join in conversation together and grow a vision for how the St. Paul's Undercroft can be transformed to support the mission and ministries of St. Paul's. Around 40 people participated in conversations on February 11, 16, 19, and 23.

Participants were invited to speak on two points, both what they appreciate about the mission and ministry of St. Paul's and how they would like to see that grow and develop. These thoughts were captured in written form and loosely arranged in categories that describe the threefold mission of St. Paul's: to its own people, to the City of Des Moines, and to the Diocese of Iowa. A total of 134 independent comments were collected.

Themes

A strong theme that emerged in these conversations was the need for the Undercroft to offer a welcoming and flexible space, inviting for diocesan events, parish programs, and ministry in the community. The desire to honor the heritage of the building, developing a modernized yet classic Undercroft that properly complements the dignity of the sanctuary, was also strongly expressed. Many of those who attended were passionate about working towards welcoming back Connections Café and several people suggested renaming it Red Door Café since this is how it is known among many of the people served. The desire to offer gifts of music and art was mentioned by several people – the desire to include artistic pieces in the remodel, to develop the space to be suitable as a host venue partnering with the Des Moines Art Show, and/or as a place to offer art-based demos and workshops, etc. Several people suggested preserving the painted capitals by incorporation into a new piece of art to include in the remodeled Undercroft. Several people imagine the new space as a music venue.

Purposes

Various particular purposes for the remodeled Undercroft space were proposed. These included

- traditional, such as receptions for weddings and funerals,
- service to the City of Des Moines, such as business meetings, luncheons, lectures, educational meetings, holiday markets
- community-focused events, such as Sunday afternoon movies (e.g. foreign language films), live jazz, mystery dinners, book discussions, cabaret, and community suppers.

Practical considerations

For the space to be fully flexible, accommodating groups of different sizes, moveable walls were suggested. At the same time, removal of non-load-bearing walls, raising the dropped ceiling and exposing stonework will reveal natural light, create a sense of openness and result in a more inviting space. Given the anticipated heavy use by congregational and outside groups, the overwhelming majority favor a hard floor, for ease of cleaning. Opening up the exterior door to 9th street was viewed favorably for accessibility and potentially attracting attention of passers-by. It was recognized that suitable storage space will need to be accommodated in the redesign. Renewed electrics with a modern lighting system (dimmable, variable) is desired, with a security system that allows for evening gatherings. Acoustics should be considered in light of planned usage of the space, including updating of the audio system and how that feeds from the sanctuary into the Undercroft. The need to update plumbing, and restrooms in the entire lower level, is evident. It was suggested that we considering installing showers and washer/dryer. A modernized HVAC system was suggested.

Conclusion

The Undercroft visioning conversations were characterized by hope and faithfulness. They included outward-facing perspectives – “the Cathedral is for the community” – and the sense that we have the potential to offer an oasis, a place of refreshment, from the rapid pace of the city. One person invited us to view the Cathedral ministry as the “plenty of ways we feed people” – physically and spiritually – and that this repurposing of St. Paul’s Undercroft is placed firmly in the context of our call to follow Jesus.

Opinion

To all this I add the consideration of improving access to the courtyard, while the Undercroft is remodeled, and a vision for daily weekday lunchtime ministries both physical and spiritual. A weekly cycle of spiritually-focused opportunities for those working in the downtown area (lunchtime Eucharist, labyrinth prayer, prayerful yoga, noon prayer, etc) would be a wonderful complement to Connections (or Red Door) Café.

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