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A historically Black church is now an event space. Who decides if it's gentrification?

Alice Berry , Reynolds Hutchins Jan 22, 2023 6

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Alice Berry , Reynolds Hutchins

A white church with green trim has sat on the corner of 10th Street and Grady Avenue in Charlottesville since 1939. In the 84 years that have passed since it was erected there, the church has served as a community center for one of the city's few remaining historically Black neighborhoods, a home to pioneers in the civil rights movement and, of course, a place of worship.

Then, in 2018, the old Trinity Episcopal Church was purchased. The new owners, the locally based Stony Point Development Group that redeveloped the Dairy Market food hall next door, poured more than \$600,000 into renovations at the church, got the necessary permits from the city and reopened the building last year as an event space.

According to the group that handles events for the landlord, in the past few months, the church has already hosted a "handful" of the "weddings and other religious ceremonies along with community meetings and celebrations" it has planned for the space.

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Not everyone is celebrating.

"It's an example of white people taking over Black spaces," Jordy Yager, the digital humanities director at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center, told The Daily Progress.



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"Gentrification" is the accusation, but it's not the word Cass Bailey used when asked about the development.

"I'm glad it's going to be used for something sacramental, that it will continue that tradition," Bailey, who is the pastor at Trinity Episcopal Church at its current home on Preston Avenue, told The Daily Progress.

The Trinity congregation moved from 10th and Grady to Preston, less than a half-mile away, in the 1970s after the congregation outgrew its prior home. There are members of the congregation who "have a memory" of services at the old church, Bailey said.

Bailey, who is Black, said he supports Stony Point's decision to open the church as a "community gathering space."

Yager, who is white, was more critical.

In a tweet to his 3,000-plus followers, Yager shared an image of a Facebook ad for weddings at the church with a message: "Can we just not? Please?"

A gathering space, not a wedding venue



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Retro Hospitality, the Richmond-based group which manages and operates both the old Trinity Church and the Dairy Market nearby, said it is fully aware of the church's history and significance.

The website for applicants interested in renting the space describes the church as "a cornerstone of the African American community."

And Bree Brostko, chief marketing officer at Retro, told the Daily Progress the team knows how important the church was and is to Charlottesville's Black community and Black history.

"It's such a treasured building in the community," Brostko said. "To have it activated again is really exciting."

Brostko would not respond to charges of gentrification.

“What I will say is we’re really excited to have this beautiful space available for community use.”

Brostko agreed with Bailey that the space should be used as a “community gathering space” and not “exclusively a wedding venue.”



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It already is, she said.

“There’s been a storytelling festival of community members, there was an art project, we’ve had therapeutic yoga for cancer survivors,” Brostko said.

Of course, that comes at a cost to the groups who want to rent the space.

Community at a cost

When the building’s new owner requested that the church be rezoned to allow people to rent it for weddings, the request said using the church for events would “increase City revenue streams both directly and indirectly.”

“It has everything to do with how money talks in this community,” Yager said.

While renting the space costs \$100 per hour, with a two-hour minimum, and \$500 for a full day, special discounts are available for “nonprofits and community groups,” according to Retro.

“We really envisioned the space being used in a multitude of ways to help the community,” Brostko said.



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That word, “community,” gets used a lot when the old Trinity Church is mentioned.

“That space was not just a religious space,” Yager said. “This was a community organizing space.”

Three churches named Trinity

Trinity Episcopal Church has had three locations since it was founded more than 100 years ago in 1919. Bailey said the church’s original members gathered at a house on High Street in Vinegar Hill, a Black neighborhood in downtown Charlottesville.

“They founded Trinity when African Americans weren’t welcome in most other local churches,” Bailey said.

That house no longer exists. It was torn down in the ‘30s to make way for the whites-only Lane High School, what is today the Albemarle County Office Building.

In 1939, the Trinity congregation moved from the house in Vinegar Hill to 10th and Grady, but only after a generous donation from the Episcopal congregation in Palmyra: the literal church itself, which was moved piece by piece 20 miles into town.



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Trinity's congregation included some of the city's most prominent Black leaders: Rev. Cornelius Dawson, who helped found Barrett Early Learning Center in 1935; George Ferguson, who headed the local NAACP chapter in the '50s; and Rev. Henry Mitchell, who served as the second Black member of the city's school board.

Mitchell led the church through the period known as "Massive Resistance" in Virginia, according to the church's website.

In 1958, Charlottesville was among the cities in the commonwealth that opted to close its schools entirely rather than allow a single Black student to learn alongside white classmates.

Trinity's congregation responded, organizing classes at the 10th and Grady location. Bailey said Trinity's congregation believed in "an intentional effort to integrate," not just the schools but the church too.

After schools reopened and integration was enforced, Trinity continued to grow, adding Black and white members. In fact, the congregation had gotten so large by the 1970s, it needed a larger place of worship, Bailey said.



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Trinity left 10th and Grady, sold the church to the owners of the dairy factory across the street and moved to a new location not far away on Preston Avenue.

New Covenant Pentecostal Church occupied the space for roughly four decades, renting from the owners of the dairy. When New Covenant left the church, Pastor William Nowell said it was because they were offered rent-free space just 10 minutes outside of town.

Trinity's decision to leave 10th and Grady was not the result of gentrification, Bailey said. "It really was a matter of outgrowing the space and needing a new space."

At Trinity's current home on Preston, Sunday services average 100 people nowadays, Bailey said. That's well above the national average in the U.S., where more than half of all churches host fewer than 65 weekly worshipers, according to the 2022 "Faith Communities Today Study" by Lifeway Research, an arm of Tennessee-based Lifeway Christian Resources.

Bailey said his congregation has continued to grow even at Preston, and the church underwent a renovation in 2019 to accommodate that growth.

“We did that without moving this time, and just kind of spruced everything up.”

Changing churches

The old Trinity Church is not the first repurposed house of worship.

The Monumental Church in Richmond, built in 1814 and once the home of another Episcopal congregation, has been renovated by the Historic Richmond Foundation. The foundation today operates the space as a “non-denominational deconsecrated church ideal for any wedding or group event,” according to its website.

In Staunton, the former AME Church built in 1924 is now a private residence with five bedrooms and three bathrooms. The property was listed two years ago for \$789,000.

And crews in Washington, D.C., are hard at work at the former St. Phillips Baptist Church, dedicated in 1892, converting the space into the Church Nightclub, a gay discotheque.

Like the old Trinity Church, the Haven, what was once First Christian Church on the corner of Market and First streets in Charlottesville, can also be rented out for a price. Only those proceeds go to the independent nonprofit group that owns the facility to help run a low-barrier day shelter and resource center there.

The Haven actually stopped offering the space for weddings after the onset of the pandemic three years ago.

“We pulled back from weddings, really since the pandemic, because we just determined that they’re not as aligned with our mission of ending homelessness,” Ocean Aiello, the Haven’s community engagement coordinator, told The Daily Progress.

The Haven hasn’t ruled out letting couples use the space for weddings in the future, Aiello said, but for now, it’ll be used for things such as New Dominion Bookshop’s conversations with local authors and performances by the University of Virginia’s salsa club.

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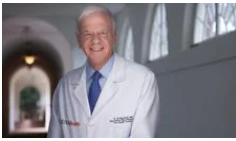
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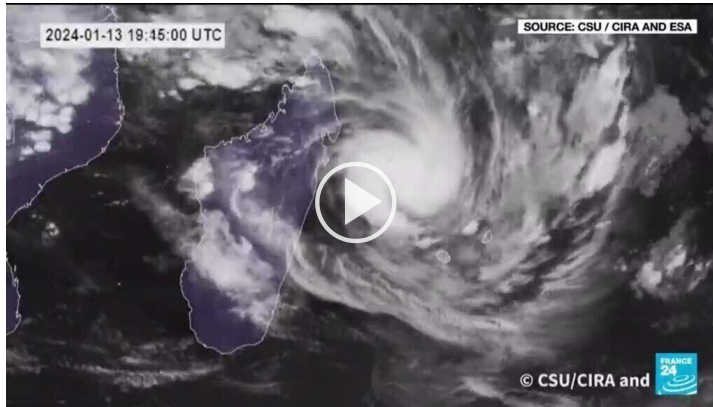
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