Our Past, Present and Future Church ~ Rector’s Forum ~ April 7, 2024

1. St Columba’s is a church on a mission to live God’s love. As we strive to realize that vision, we are ready to launch some exciting ideas - a new plan for our church property, forged from the ambitious ideas of our parishioners, the ingenuity of our staff and the hard work of our Master Planning Committee. In celebration of our 150th anniversary, we want to rework our buildings to accommodate our thriving and energetic congregation, while creating new infrastructure that helps our city’s housing crisis, laying a solid financial foundation for the future and tackling one of the toughest issues in our legacy.

This morning, I am going to give a broad overview. ET & SS, co-chairs of the MPC will share more detail. Then we’d like to hear your thoughts.

1. We want to build something that will last for decades, just as our forebears built this space that has served our congregation and neighborhood for decades. Our physical building needs upgrading to accommodate the lively, diverse and multi-generational community that St Columba’s has become - and we have a growing online community. The past, present and future of St Columba’s all need to be part of our thinking, and of the beloved community that we seek to create here on earth.
2. To get here, we have listened to parishioners and neighbors who have constructively critiqued and commented on our plans. We first invited everyone to contribute their ideas from the church and then, in the fall of 2023, we opened those ideas to comment. The feedback was rich and helpful – with many different, sometimes divergent, views. We have heard you and made adjustments: we have scaled back the number of housing units we envisaged for our site, we have removed some ideas that were less exciting to our congregation, and we have added elements that will help to welcome newcomers, and improve our accessibility and ability to reach out into our community. We have also looked around to the many churches in DC and elsewhere that are looking at ways to use their properties more effectively.

Four mission-based priorities ~

1. First, we want to reconfigure our existing property to use our space most effectively in support of our mission and ministries. We have a mix of necessary repairs and upgrades, improved accessibility, support for current ministry, and preparations for the future.

Our plans include

* absolutely essential improvements to our primary entrances from Albemarle and Butterworth streets to enable greater accessibility. Both entrances are suffering from failing iron and concrete.
* updates to the Common where we gather before and after services
* some internal changes to “the Music Wing” and to the 2nd floor where our youth gather and where our water ministry offers community and hospitality to those who need.
* Improvements to the Great Hall – including light, sound and technology - where we hold our children’s services,
* updates to the kitchen that feeds congregants and visitors,
* more accessible bathrooms,
* upgrades to our technology, so we can meet and share in worship with those near and far.
* Separately, the Nursery School is already underway with plans to rebuild our much-loved playground.

These changes come from suggestions made by our staff, clergy and parishioners, so we can offer a warmer welcome to all. These changes align with our mission and our values, and the work that our ministries do. We are excited about the new possibilities this would open up.

1. Second, we want to use the site at Fletcher House to help address our city’s scarcity of affordable housing. In place of the existing house, we intend to construct a building consisting of eight 3-bedroom townhouses for sale as condos.

As currently conceived the eight units would consist of:

* 4 units of workforce housing, meant to be affordable for families earning 50-80% of AMI - DCPS teachers, nurses, police
* 2 units of market-rate housing
* 2 units of housing retained by the church (e.g., staff or refugee housing)

In this planning effort, we are partnering with Manna Homes, a DC-based non-profit with forty years of experience developing affordable housing and helping others to do it.

Home ownership in a high opportunity community is exceedingly difficult without generational or familial wealth. For St. Columba’s to construct mixed-income housing on our own property would be a generational game-changer for those families, and be a meaningful step toward acknowledging and repairing our own (racist) history, in a way that contributes directly to our congregation’s strategic priorities.

We could also create a fund to support first-time home ownership.

1. Our plans are not all focused on construction. We believe this is a moment for our third goal, to underpin our future by building an endowment for our church. Unlike many older churches, we do not have such a financial basis for our work. We live very much from year to year, without reserves for large repair and replacement needs, and having more settled finances would allow us to focus more on what we can do for others.
2. While we raise money for the church of today and the community that will live in our neighborhood in the future, we cannot ignore the past. St. Columba’s parish history is entangled with slavery and racist removal of people of color from our neighborhood in ways that we are only now coming to understand. Our fourth item is that we believe that we need to consider acting to address these past harms. We cannot look to the future with new construction on this site without considering how we got where we are, and to whom we owe a debt of contrition. Our commitment to become an anti-racist church inspires us to look at possible steps for reparations. As a congregation we have some shared values about justice and the dignity of every human being; the conversation about how best to act on these values is ongoing. With guidance from St. Columba’s anti-racism task force, the vestry is affirming principles and criteria for action.
3. All of these priorities will entail a significant fund raising effort. The church will have more to say later this year about the costs and how we will approach them. For now, we should note that the overall costs for the work on our existing building are estimated at between $10m and $12m, depending on what is included. The costs of the Fletcher House project would be perhaps another $500,000, after recognizing proceeds from sales of the units we construct – assuming that the church retains two of them for our use.

These estimates are subject to revision as we work further on the project. We will be launching a campaign later this year to celebrate our 150th anniversary, and to underpin our vision with solid resources.

1. What’s next? We want to hear back from you - from neighbors and members of the church, as our plans take more final shape. We believe that the options we have outlined after listening, studying and praying, are the right ones, but we are open to thoughts about how we achieve them. We will be talking to the community again, and listening, and we will be setting out more details and filling in the remaining gaps in our thinking. There is still work to be done, but we are further down the road. If you have comments, please email us on ourfuturechurch@columba.org.
2. At this 150th anniversary, our sights are on the past, present, and future. Our longer term goal is not just to use our resources wisely and improve our infrastructure, but to build something vital and new. Buildings are only as important as what happens inside and around them. We are a church that is thriving and healthy, working for justice, caring for the environment, engaging our neighbors, welcoming our congregation with music and worship, welcoming children to our services and our playground. This is our vision: the Beloved Community, here on earth.