

Church plans to breathe new life into old building



EVERYONE SMILE—Parishioners of all ages sat for this portrait in front of United Evangelical Church, taken in 1937. In those days, the Sunday School (the building to the left of the church in the photo) was filled to bursting with children each week. UEC plans to rehab the building for use as a multi-tenant non-profit center.

Photo courtesy of United Evangelical Church

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The most eye-catching thing in the old photograph isn't the immaculately clean street. It's not the well-tended brick of the buildings, which include United Evangelical Church.

It's the sheer, staggering number of children arranged in front of them.

"Look at that," says Rev. Catherine Oatman, her face curving into a smile as she stares down at the sepia-toned image of countless girls in summer dresses and white socks, and boys in shorts and ties who are taking up this corner of East Avenue and Dillon Street. "They used to have just hundreds of children who went to Sunday school here. Hundreds."

The note on the photo says it was taken in 1937. Those were the days when all four floors of the big brick building next door to the church were bulging every Sunday.

These days, Sunday schools don't carry that kind of enrollment, and many churches don't even offer an organized program. But the big brick building next to United Evangelical still stands. It still sees child-size traffic, thanks to PACT, or Parents and Children Together, the church's preschool program. And if all goes well, even more kids will be coming in the door.

At least, that is, if Sokol Gymnastics takes up the invitation.

United Evangelical's decision to turn the former Sunday school building a multi-tenant non-profit center is, according to Oatman, just another extension of the church's mission to minister to the city.

"For the last three years, we've been looking into what to do with (the building)," she says.

The church thought about selling the building to a developer, but at the end of the day, nobody had the heart to part with an edifice that had meant so much to the parishioners. Besides, with the building gone, PACT would

have nowhere to go – and that would leave quite a number of parents and children adrift.

"They were a reason we really struggled with the idea of selling the building," said Oatman.

Various ideas were considered, but the real estate market was slowing down. Oatman prayed for guidance.

From talks with community groups, such as the Canton Community Association, requests emerged to use the building for groups that had to do with the arts, or groups that benefited children.

"We all believed that as a church, God was calling us

Continued on page 5

CHURCH BLDG.

Continued from page 3



THE VIEW FROM HERE—The view from the top of the former Sunday school building includes a panorama of Baltimore. Rev. Cathy Oatman, pastor of United Evangelical Church, would like to see the building transformed into housing for neighborhood non-profits. Sokol Gymnastics, presently located in Upper Fells, is interested in one floor of the building. Parents and Children Together, a preschool, takes up the second floor at the moment.

Photo by Mary Helen Sprecher

to do this," said Oatman.

The pieces started falling into place. Sokol Baltimore, a locally based gymnastics, tumbling, dance and cheer program, was looking for new digs. The program, which had been housed for years over St. Patrick's hall on Bank Street, needed a large area—but also needed a landlord with an understanding of the challenges of community groups (not something easily found in a rapidly gentrifying area where parking is a challenge and property values are on the rise).

Personnel from Sokol were eyeing the first floor of the big square building as Oatman took a quick trip up the stairs.

"They're the first people who have been serious about this," she said.

The building has a lot to offer the right tenants. There are 3,200 square feet per floor. If all goes according to plan, Sokol would take up the first floor. PACT would remain on the second floor. The other two floors?

Well, that remains to be seen. It's possible that several groups could set up office space on one floor and share resources, such as copy machines, faxes or phones.

Oatman would like to see the fourth floor – or perhaps part of it – used as a conference center, or maybe even as a space for receptions or meetings.

"The view is beautiful," she says, walking over to a window and looking out over the panorama of Canton, Highlandtown and beyond.

The idea of using the building as an incubator for the area's non-profits has a lot of appeal to the congregation, she adds.

"We as a church want to be a partner in our community. By helping out these non-profits, by giving the space here, we have the opportunity to give back to our community, not just to take from it."

There are still things to be figured out – logistics, remodeling, renovation work that may need to be done, based on various clients.

"We have time to think about that," she says, shrugging.

Like much of Southeast Baltimore, the building is

imbued with a sense of the past. There are old leather-bound books of the Bible up in what used to be the choir room. A few documents here and there reference the church's old name, German United Evangelical Church.

"They changed that back around the '30s, when having German in your name wasn't really politically correct," said Oatman.

Through the years, UEC was also known as 'Batz' church, after a long-gone (but much loved) pastor.

"You still hear people call it that sometimes," said Oatman.

And of course, there are photos from years gone by. The confirmations. The Sunday schools. The church suppers.

"Sour beef and dumplings. That was a big thing here," says Oatman, looking down at one photo.

The church still does a Lenten tableau of the Last Supper during Holy Week. Some things never change.

Oatman looks down again at the photo showing the Sunday school children, as well as their parents.

"These people have lived here all their lives," she said. "They were born in these rowhouses, and they were married from them. Their children were baptized here."

And when they die, she helps bury them.

"There's a big honor in being able to take those last few steps with someone," she says simply.

At the moment, she is interested in helping her church welcome new life into the big square building next door.

"It's part of our mission here," she says. "It's part of what we as a church do."