

The Church and the Project that Just Would Not Die

The Transformation of the Wesley United Church Sunday School Building into the Wesley Community Centre

This is the story of a small congregation in large church in a secular society. Logically, the story should have ended in 1996 – with the closure of the church building and its sale to another, larger denomination or to a condo developer. But you won't find much logic in this account. It is much more a story of faith and determination.

In *Wesley – Committed to Community*, published at the same time as this short piece (November 14, 2004), David Hanna tells how Wesley came within a whisker of closing its doors for good in the mid-90s. Then a small core of Wesley members, some of long standing and others relatively new arrivals, concluded that Wesley still had an important spiritual role to play in central NDG. It was more than the kind of attachment one has to a house in which one has raised a family now departed; it was a matter of faith in God, in each other and in the greater community. So they began to rebuild.

The people came together in study groups to renew their spiritual vision of their church. They spread this vision by distributing flyers door-to-door over thirty city blocks. They went caroling at Christmas. They held karaoke nights open to all, drawing in teenagers who later showed up to climb four-storey scaffolding and help to scrape off tiles and wash and paint walls to look as they had when the sanctuary was built in 1925. An interior designer was asked to draft plans for the refurbishing of Harvey Lee Hall, the principal room of the adjoining Sunday School Building. With the help of Quebec's Religious Heritage Foundation, masonry and stained glass windows were repaired. New faces appeared in the congregation. And Wesley continued to house a wide range of community groups, often effectively subsidizing them when the price of natural gas rose beyond the group's ability to pay the full market cost of heat.

So Wesley was ready when, on April 14, 2002, the Foundation announced its Partial Recycling Program for Heritage Church Buildings. The Church's members believed in their future together even if they did not know what that future would look like. Or how they would get there. They had a vision for the use of the excess space in the building and much experience in working with community organizations. They were open to change but careful about how to bring it about. They had just the kind of leadership needed to get a project going and keep it going through thick and thin: a heritage activist, a real-estate lawyer and an engineer! Behind them was a host of hard-working volunteers from 14 to 84 years in age.

In late April, the congregation was told that Minister of Culture Diane Lemieux wanted to "fast-track" Wesley and a Roman Catholic Church as pilot projects to be completed by the end of the year! So the Foundation mandated CIRQ, a non-profit organization specialized in community revitalization projects, to work with Wesley to see if its buildings could be renovated in such a way as to attract enough tenants at sufficient

rent to make an eventual government investment worthwhile. Duschenes and Fish were retained to do the architectural work. Wesley set up a Building Renewal Team to work with CIRQ.

From the outset, the Team made it clear that whatever initiatives were undertaken had to fit with Wesley's spiritual mission. Church members participated in a "Planning Our Future" exercise in May of 2002. This was the beginning of a back-and-forth process between the Renewal Team, the church's board of directors, and the full congregation that carried on until the project was finally completed in October of 2004. It reflected the democratic nature of United Church governance, but also the need to have everyone on board when major financial commitments were being made or a work bee called – and many were! Unanimous votes of approval were rare indeed, but the consensus established from the start, and the long-standing trust in each other's good faith meant that even those who voted against going ahead at various stages came out and worked as hard at making the project a success as those who had voted for it!

On May 22, 2002, CIRQ presented its preliminary findings, indicating that there was a large demand in NDG for daycare spaces, and that filling them would produce significant rental income. The Renewal Team made some preliminary sketches of how this need might be met within the Sunday School Building. The idea of a daycare as our core tenant began to take shape and a daycare looking for new premises began to discuss with Wesley the possibility of becoming that anchor. Meanwhile, the Quebec Government put a freeze on the development of \$5-a-day daycares as well as grants to those interested in starting a private daycare. So we might be eligible for the renovation grant but not have a daycare tenant to justify the investment!

While most members of the congregation were prepared to see the main parts of the Sunday School Building converted to community use, there was resistance to giving up the kitchen and the parlour, and flat rejection by many members of proposals for modification of the sanctuary. In the end, the latter stayed as it was, and the kitchen and parlour were cut out of the renovation project. A congregational meeting was announced for August 25, but the Renewal Team's many sessions with CIRQ and the architects forced the Team to delay the August 25 meeting until September 8 in order to re-crunch the numbers and come up with a plan that they felt the Foundation would agree to. Wesley's August 28 rendezvous with the Foundation's "Comité de suivi" (responsible for overseeing the Partial Recycling Program on the Foundation's behalf) was put off till the end of September. The congregation's September 8 meeting was delayed again, but finally, on September 19, Wesley's Board received from CIRQ a report whose numbers had been considerably revised by members of the Renewal Team. The oft-delayed Congregational Meeting finally took place on September 22. The Congregation endorsed the Board's recommendation to present the revised version of the CIRQ Report to the Foundation. Price tag: \$850,000. The Renewal Team informed the first prospective daycare that the rental they were prepared to pay was far from sufficient, and rather than improving Wesley's financial standing, Wesley would be subsidizing the day care. The hunt was on for other anchors.

On October 10, the Foundation agreed to grant the project a maximum of \$ 600,000, subject to final approval by the Ministry of Culture on November 14. Where to find the remaining \$ 250,000? The Montreal Presbytery began talking about possible low-interest loan from its Finance and Extension Board, and eventually a \$ 210,000 line of credit was arranged by this body. On November 3, the Congregation accepted the Foundation's offer of \$ 600,000 even though there was no firmly committed anchor tenant. Plans were to be drawn up and tenders called as soon as the Culture Department gave the final okay. Three days later, Presbytery announced a line of credit to a maximum of \$ 210,000, conditional on the submission of a business plan. Four days later, Wesley met with the NDG Community Council in an effort to build up our potential tenant base of community groups. On November 14, the "Comite de suivi" reduced the grant to \$ 500,000 and told Wesley that to access even that amount, a written commitment from a "Centre de petit enfance" was essential. The Team took these blows and plodded on.

On the second day of 2003, Wesley learned that we were still eligible for \$ 600,000. Then, on January 16, we learned that this amount was no longer conditional on us having a "Centre de petite enfance" as an anchor tenant; we simply had to have enough firm financial commitments to make the renovation project viable. An Open House was planned for Saturday, February 13 in order to attract prospective tenants. Some thirty people from fifteen different organizations attended, some of the drawn by a large banner strung across the front of the Sunday School Building to let the neighbourhood know that we were open for tenants. Dozens of other prospects responded during the year that the banner stayed up.

The Liberals' taking of the reins of power on April 12 had no impact on the \$600,000 – it was in the Ministry's coffers, waiting for the final project go-ahead. What was not clear was whether the new Quebec Government would fund any new daycares. When Wesley's Board met on May 28, its members learned that the "Comité de suivi" had given Wesley until October to actually start the project; however, if we did not submit a business plan by June 25, the money would evaporate. So the CIRQ Report's numbers were crunched again, and a revised version submitted as our business plan on June 23. The Foundation approved it in two days and told us we could start tapping the \$ 600,000 once we had a daycare signed up. A downtown daycare showed some interest in opening a branch operation at Wesley, but by the end of the summer, it became clear that this was not going to happen. However, a founding member of our Renewal Team with much daycare experience decided to start developing her own proposal for a private daycare. It was to become the anchor of our final proposal.

On October 1, 2003, the Trustees recommended to the Board that Wesley proceed with the Building Project while keeping a watchful eye on expenses. Five days later, the Board agreed and authorized the use of the Church's reserve funds. Final approval was left to the Congregation on November 2nd. Fifty-four people showed up to be briefed and to debate: it was make-or-break time. Secret-ballot votes produced solid majorities in favour of proceeding with the project and accessing the church's financial reserves should the need arise. The Renewal Team was disbanded, but not before

hearty thanks were expressed to its members for their huge investment of time and energy to steer the project through so many obstacles that it could now be launched. This group was replaced by an Interface Team which include some of the same people from the previous committee. The Interface Team continued to oversee the actual renovations. A Celebration Committee was also established, in order to let the surrounding community know that the renovation project was going ahead, and to prepare “a mighty feast” to mark the project’s completion. A timeline for reaching that goal was presented. Once again, it proved to be hopelessly optimistic.

The architect’s plans were prepared pretty much on schedule. However, by the time we went to bids for the actual work early in March, we were five weeks behind. Tenders were opened on March 19 and discussions with the lowest bidder, P. Leclerc Construction, and architect Fernando Pellicer of Duschenes and Fish opened in order to bring the project within the amounts discussed with the Foundation and the Finance and Extension (F and E) Board of the Montreal Presbytery. The Trustees approved the Leclerc bid on March 21, the Board on March 24, F and E on March 25, and the Congregation on April 4. On April 23, the “Comité de suivi” gave the green light for the project to proceed. The architect told the contractor to get ready to start. On May 4th, written confirmation of approval was received from the Foundation. On May 12, the City of Montreal issued the construction permits and five days later work began. This was two and a half months later than the start-up date given the Congregation the previous November. Would we be ready to welcome not one but two daycares at the end of August?

Nerves became even more frayed in mid-July when a cheque from the Foundation was unavoidably delayed during the Ministry of Culture's holiday period. The contractor who required funds in order to pay sub-contractors indicated that work would have to be stopped. To avoid such a situation, Church members were solicited to provide short-term loans and they responded quickly and most generously. However, just before it was necessary to use the loans, the Foundation cheque was received thus ending the crisis. By August 30, the daycares were able to open their doors. In the first few weeks of September, the rest of our tenants were able to move in and the elevator started running from the basement to the upper floors. We hardly recognized the old Sunday School Building; indeed, it now made the rest of the building look kind of shabby. So tired as we were, we gave the parlour a complete remake with fresh coats of paint on the walls and ceiling, and shiny new tiles on the floor. We were ready to celebrate the end of the long, windy and occasionally swampy road on which we had travelled since 2002. We are confident that the \$ 1,050,750 pricetag will give value to a myriad of community groups and to the major investor, the Quebec Government. As for ourselves, more secure financially than we have been for years, we are ready to focus our energies on spiritual outreach to the community that surrounds our amazing pile of heritage bricks.

Graham Weeks

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