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'A different kind of church': Historic north Omaha church envisioned as new community center

By Erin Duffy / World-Herald staff writer
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She knows it needs work.

Step inside the soaring sanctuary space of the former church on the corner of North 24th and Wirt Streets and try not to wince at the damage wrought by time, water and benign neglect.

There's a now-patched hole in the roof, sheets of plaster peeling off the walls and rows of pews collapsing like a deck of cards. There's mold blooming on walls and piles of raccoon poop in the choir loft upstairs.

Katrina Adams, the new owner of the building formerly known as the Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth and, prior to that, Calvin Memorial Presbyterian Church, is undaunted.

OK, she's a little daunted, but still determined.



Katrina Adams is silhouetted in front of stained-glass windows in the former Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth.

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“I am energized, and at the same time terrified, because it is a huge undertaking,” she said.

Adams bought the north Omaha church with the stately white columns, brick façade, dome and stained-glass windows last May. Its neoclassical architecture and deep ties to the community have led to designations on the National Register of Historic Places and as a City of Omaha local landmark.

As a kid growing up on 24th and Parker Streets, Adams knew it as the popcorn ball church — parishioners used to sell the treats as a fundraiser for roof repairs and other projects.

Now, she has big plans to bring the nearly 110-year-old building into the 21st century and transform it into a new kind of neighborhood gathering place: a community center.

“It was designed as a church, but I feel like what I want to create is a different kind of church,” she said. “So maybe it’s not grounded in religion so much as it is community. It’s still a place for fellowship, it’s still a place for hope and faith and connection to something bigger than oneself.”

If she can pull off the repairs and renovation — hopefully funded through a capital campaign and restoration grants — Adams could tap into a wave of renewal percolating on North 24th Street, the historic heart of north Omaha.

“I think there’s a lot of places in the city that have had a rebirth,” said Eric Crawford, CEO of the Heart Ministry Center at 24th and Binney Streets. “Why not 24th Street and north Omaha as well?”

A study of neighborhood housing and transportation needs, called Forever North, is underway. New businesses and social spots are opening up in other parts of the corridor, including TBC Shop, the shop and headquarters for world champion boxer Terence “Bud” Crawford; artist space Culxr House; and the Grown Folks private social club.

(An open house that will include updates on the Forever North project is scheduled for Jan. 21 at the Heart Ministry Center, from 4 to 7 p.m.)

Other developments include the \$2.4 million Fair Deal Village Marketplace, the Union for Contemporary Art and the new \$5.8 million Heart Ministry Center, which houses a food pantry, walk-in clinic and other social service programs.

“North 24th Street is experiencing really a renaissance,” said LaVonya Goodwin, president of the North



24th Street Business Improvement District and co-owner of Goodwin's Spencer Street Barbershop across the street from the old church. "This is the history of this area. ... You could get every need met on 24th Street and that's what we want to refurbish and bring back, and it's happening."

The former Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth is marked by its stately white columns, brick façade, dome and stained-glass windows.

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Goodwin counted three restoration projects for local landmarks that are expected to get off the ground in 2020: the church; her family's barbershop, described by some as "Omaha's Black City Hall"; and the Carnation Ballroom, a onetime music venue where legends like Duke Ellington, Chuck Berry and B.B. King reportedly played.

It's not millionaire developers spearheading these projects, but regular people bent on improving their neighborhood, Goodwin said. The corridor still needs more businesses, too, so residents don't have to leave the area to shop or eat out, she said.

"It's feasible as the small guy," she said. "You just have to work at it."



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Adams, a program manager at the Omaha Community Foundation, had been cultivating a seed of an idea for a while: a community hub that could connect nonprofits, local businesses and the residents of north Omaha, largely people of color.

"How do we explore what's possible like other communities do, like Atlanta and Washington, D.C.?" she said. "We lose a lot of young, brilliant leaders of color because we lack some of the things that larger cities with different populations have.

“We do have amazing artists, historians, we have these resources, it’s just how do we leverage them? How do we amplify our voices? If it’s not going to be built for us, then we have to build it for ourselves.”

The church at 24th and Wirt has sat empty for years. The growing list of repairs for the roof and other parts of the aging building had overwhelmed the small congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth, which belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Pastor Frank Parker could not be reached for comment.

The church has a long history that has often reflected the racial tensions of Omaha. It was designed by prominent local architect Frederick Henninger, who was likely inspired by the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition held nearby on the site of what is now Kountze Park. It opened in 1910 as North Presbyterian Church, according to Adam Fletcher Sasse, who runs northomahahistory.com.

As the white congregants of North Presbyterian moved out of north Omaha, the church attempted to integrate two congregations, white and black, in the 1950s. It became Calvin Memorial Presbyterian Church. The congregation eventually became predominantly black again, Calvin Memorial merged and moved and the Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth took over the building in 1992, Sasse wrote on his site.



Owner Katrina Adams has plans to turn the former Church of Jesus Christ Whole Truth into a community center. "It's still a place for fellowship, it's still a place for hope and faith and connection to something bigger than oneself," she said.

With the help of an investor she declined to name, Adams was able to purchase the 20,000-square-foot building for \$90,000 through a limited liability company.

With renovations, she imagines what she calls the POC (people of color) Collaborative Community Resource Center as a mix of Do Space, the tech library at 72nd and Dodge; a small business incubator; and a

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community engagement area with space for classes, art exhibits and back-office support for entrepreneurs or nonprofit leaders who need help with accounting or IT.

The church's large chapel area could become configurable flex space, screening movies one night and hosting a pop-up shop or voter registration event the next. The church's commercial kitchen — now splattered with grease from fish fries past — could be used for cooking classes or community meal prep sessions.

Adams is talking to people in the community to see what holes need to be filled. This is a project she wants to create with the community, not force upon them.

“It's really about building something that serves all of us,” she said. “A lot of people don't know me. I have to do the same legwork and community-building and trust-building type things.”

Ashley Kuhn is a board member for POC Collaborative and the president of Blair Freeman, a construction and real estate firm that will tackle the renovations of the church. She said the building is structurally sound — it just needs a lot of updates and cosmetic work.

The space inside is sprawling, with areas once used for worship, offices, meals, Sunday school and more. There are still vestiges of its former life inside — an old organ, sewing tables and prayer books.

“It is daunting when you look at a project like this that's been decaying so long, but the bones are so good,” Kuhn said. “This is a dream project for someone who likes historic buildings.”

Kyle Keith lives behind the church and said Adams beat him to the punch — he's been talking about buying it since he was a little kid. But he's happy to see someone with new plans for it, and he's joined the board of POC Collaborative at Adams' urging.

“Finally, we're going to see some life on this part of 24th Street,” he said.

Photos: Scenes of North Omaha

North Omaha is the epicenter of the city's black history and culture. Check out these photos, many of which were taken during the 1960s, to see the neighborhood at the peak of its vibrancy.

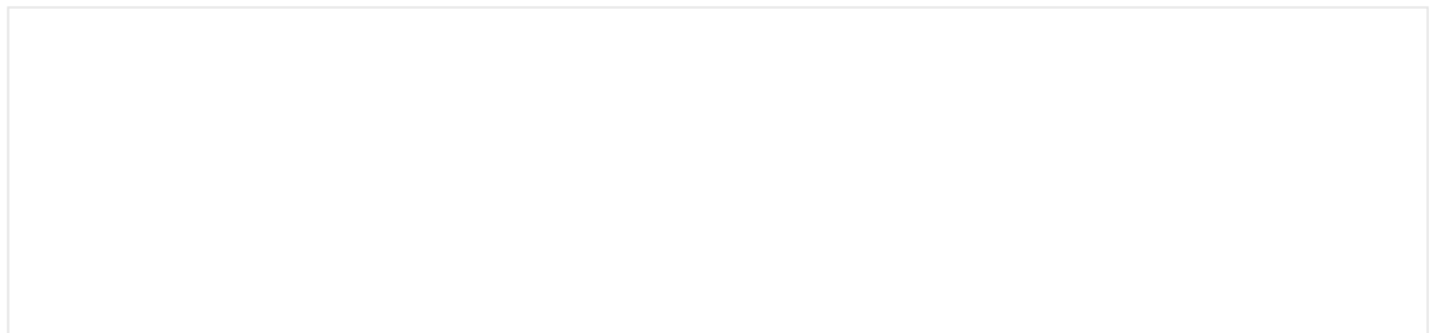
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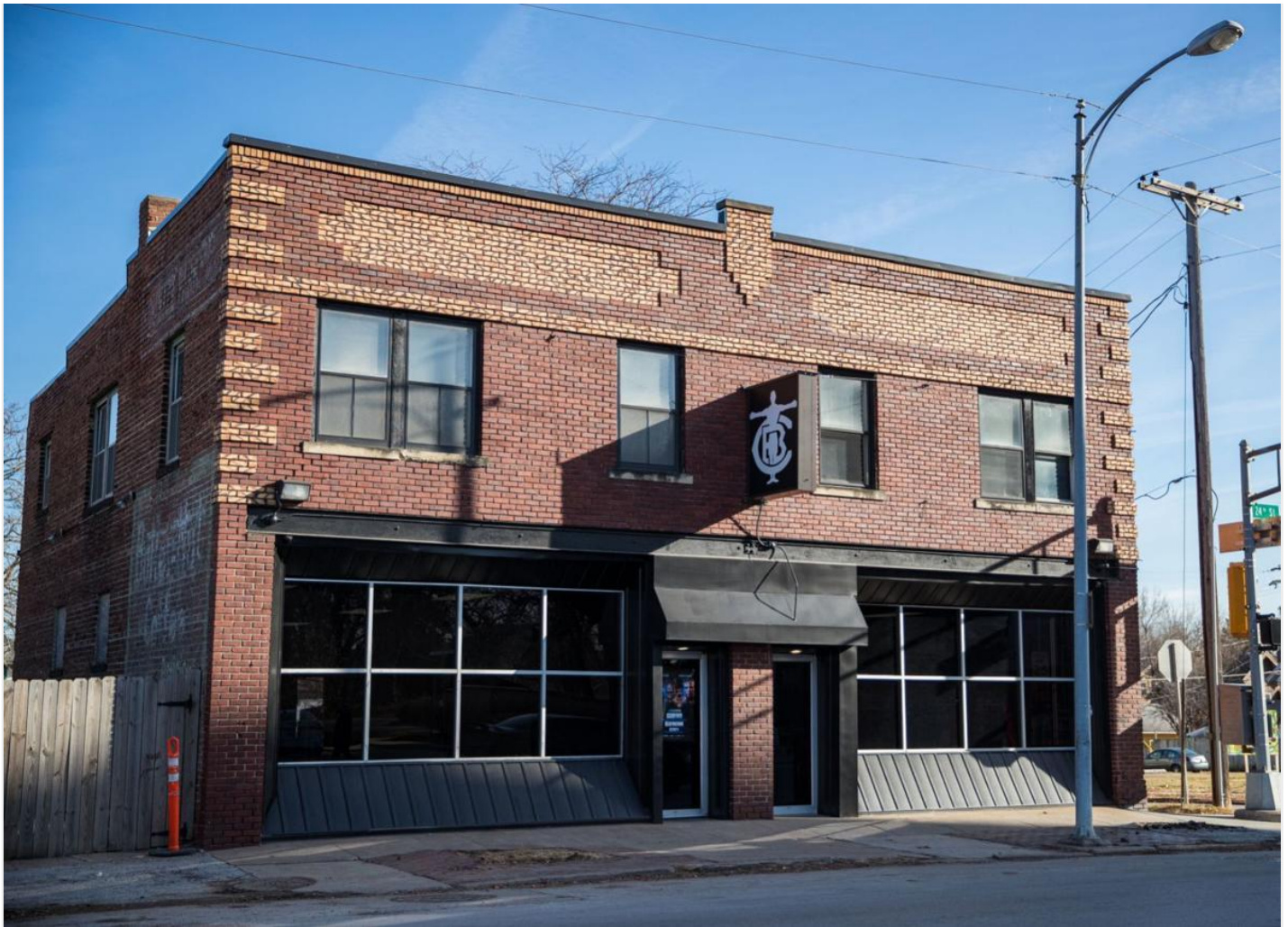


24th Street between Patrick and Burdette looking north, during the Health Fair parade in May 1967.

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