

In Nebraska, empty churches are becoming apartments, museums

Declining attendance and rising costs are forcing churches to close.
Nebraskans are finding creative uses for the buildings.

By Naomi Delkamiller
Flatwater Free Press

The kitchen table isn't far from the altar in Kathy and Tim Johnson's home. A comfortable recliner and cozy couch share the living room with a wooden pew. Stained-glass windows cast colorful shadows across their bedroom.

"Other people walk in and they stop and they just go, 'wow,'" Kathy Johnson said.

"We just kind of forget that it was a church."

After over a century of worship, Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Benedict closed its doors in January 2020. Seven months later, the Johnsons bought it.

This house of worship turned home is one of a number of Nebraska churches that, amid rising costs and falling attendance, have found second lives filling gaps in their local communities. Churches are becoming apartments, community centers and places to preserve history and foster the arts.

In early February, the Lincoln City Council signed off on a proposal to turn the former Southminster Methodist Church into offices and apartments.

Cadre Architecture and Design is set to buy the church for \$350,000 after New Visions United Methodist Church decided to merge into one building and sell their two remaining properties in Lincoln.

A Baptist congregation bought the first, while the latter, awaiting a religious buyer, received only secular offers. Other proposals included a gym and an art gallery.

"We were focused on selling the buildings to other churches, but it doesn't have to be that way," New Visions board chair Beth Baldwin said.

New Visions had a front row seat to what Rick Reinhard calls the "great mismatch."

Aging congregations no longer have the resources or numbers to fill and maintain large and, in some cases, deteriorating buildings, said Reinhard, an urban planner and consultant who spent four years assessing United Methodist Church properties across the U.S. He points to four factors

that have contributed to the mismatch: declining membership, rising property expenses, virtual livestream options and COVID-19.

"There was hope that someday we would get back to being three separate churches after the pandemic, but it just became so obvious that something needed to be done," said the Rev. Doyle Burbank-Williams, pastor at New Visions.

Americans' participation in organized religion has declined in recent decades, multiple surveys have shown.

A study by the public Religion Research Institute found a combined 56% of respondents in 2022 said they either seldom or never attend religious services - up from 43% in 2013.

That tracks with research by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research that found median attendance at weekly worship services decreased from 137 attendees in 2000 to 65 attendees in 2020.

The Omaha Archdiocese, which spans from Omaha to Sioux City, told the Flatwater Free Press that only 25% of Catholics in northeast Nebraska attend Sunday Mass and there's been a 42% decline in mass attendance since 2003. Fifteen churches in the Archdiocese have closed since 2000.

The United Methodist Church Great Plains Conference, which includes Nebraska and Kansas, has seen 81 churches close since 2014.

Three other Christian religious authorities in Nebraska contacted by the Flatwater Free Press either did not respond or said they did not keep records of closures to confidently report.

Part of the mismatch, Reinhard said, lies in the fact that many churches were constructed at a time when they needed to be within walking distance.

"Well, not only do we have motorized vehicles now we have the internet," he said. "So if I want to watch the Archbishop of Canterbury service in London, all I need to do is to click the mouse."

Churches are also expensive to operate. The International Facility Management Association estimates that it costs \$7 to \$10 per square foot an-



Kathy and Tim Johnson sit at their kitchen table in Benedict, Neb., on Sunday, Feb. 18, 2024. The Johnsons live in the former Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. The high ceilings and stained-glass windows were overwhelming at first, but now they enjoy the unique features. Photo by Naomi Delkamiller/Flatwater Free Press

nually to run a church.

Rising maintenance costs factored into the decision to sell the First Baptist Church in Wayne in 2021, according to Matt Ley.

Ley bought the property for \$175,000 after seeing the listing on Facebook. At one point, he said, the congregation was considering selling the church windows, demolishing the building and selling the lot. He thought that would be a mistake.

"You cannot build that building the way it is now for less than \$4 million these days," Ley said.

He renovated the church into six apartment units, which now rent for between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a month.

"I really just wanted to save one of the most beautiful buildings in town and provide different housing options."

Nebraska hasn't been immune from a nationwide housing shortage. A 2022 report by the Strategic Housing Council of Nebraska found a statewide shortage of 32,230 rental units for extremely low-income households. The report noted the shortage extends to housing at all price points across the state.

Kathy and Tim Johnson sold their home in York and moved into the former church in Benedict

out of a desire to live closer to family without the burden of a mortgage.

They bought and renovated the 5,100-square-

foot church for less than \$100,000, most of which was used to build a kitchen, add plumbing upstairs and update the wiring.

"Overall, the structure was basically sound as far as not needing any re-

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Beth Baldwin sits in a pew of the remaining New Visions church in Lincoln, Neb., Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024. Baldwin lives in the Southminster neighborhood, making it "doubly important" that the buyer was a good fit. Photo by Naomi Delkamiller/Flatwater Free Press

Thomas County Library New Book Titles



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by Steve Berry
- The Midwife of Auschwitz
by Anna Stuart
- The 14th Colony
by Steve Berry
- The Bishop's Pawn
by Steve Berry
- From Sand & Ash
by Amy Harmon
- Kill Me Tomorrow
Old Cowboys Never Die
by William W. Johnstone
- One of Us is Lying &
One of Us is Next
by Karen McManus
- Playing With Fire
by April Henry

- All Good People Here
by Ashley Flowers
- Fourteen Days
by Margaret Atwood &
Douglas Preston
- The Women
by Kristin Hannah
- The Husbands
by Holly Gramazio
- The Titanic Survivors Book Club
by Timothy Schaffert
- The Piano Tuner
by Daniel Mason
- The Sisters of Auschwitz
by Roxane van Iperen
- The North Woods
by Daniel Mason
- The Book of Names
by Kristin Harmel



The Southminster United Methodist Church at the corner of 16th and Otoe streets in Lincoln, Neb. New Visions is under contract with Cadre Holdings with a closing date to be set in the next few weeks. The new owners are seeking historical landmark status before starting renovations. Photo by Naomi Delkamiller/Flatwater Free Press