

Performing arts groups seeking church building

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A consortium of performing arts groups are eyeing the building that until recently housed Covenant Methodist Church at 2123 Harrison St. as a possible new home for a cultural arts center, the Review has learned.

Members of the group are in negotiations with the Chicago Northwestern District of the United Methodist Church, the organization that owned the church, to buy the building, said Larry DiStasi, a co-founder and artistic director of the Actors Gymnasium, on Tuesday.

"They are very interested in us and the project," he said. "They are interested in the building staying as it is. They would hate to knock it down."

Covenant held its last service April 11, Easter Sunday. The congregation is merging with Hemenway United Methodist Church, 933 Chicago Ave.

Actors Gymnasium is a popular circus and performing arts school now based at the city-run Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St. So are a number of other groups, including the Piven Theatre Workshop, which also have expressed interest in the venture, DiStasi said.

Ideally, "a number of us, the Actors Gymnasium included, would simply be expanding our operations and occupying both places," he said.

The arts groups' plan also would allow Covenant Nursery School to continue to operate out of the church building, where it has been a tenant since the mid-1970s.

Covenant Nursery has an enrollment of 140 children, many of whom live within walking distance of the popular school. The school enjoyed a strong relationship with the church, with some church members volunteering in classrooms.

"We were very connected to it and just feel heartbroken about the whole thing," said Cynthia Johnson, the school's principal.

The school is working on a one-year lease with the church, and is concerned that if the building is sold, the new owner may not want to extend the lease.

"The school has been making a real effort to find a potential purchaser for the building who wants to retain the nursery school," said Jane Grover, president of the parent board of directors.

DiStasi and his wife, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (also a co-founder of the Actors Gymnasium), have a child in the school. They began looking into the situation after they heard the nursery school may have to find a new home.

Hernandez-DiStasi looked over the church space and thought it would be a perfect place as an alternative spot.

DiStasi said "we (Actors Gymnasium) initially looked to buy (the building) ourselves. Then we found out about all these other folks who were interested, and we decided to team up with a group of arts organizations and try to work as a group."

He said the 32,000-square-foot church, particularly the sanctuary with its high ceilings, would make an ideal facility for the Actors Gymnasium, which uses trapezes in its work.

"We're very excited about this project," he said.

The groups hope to bring other organizations aboard to make the prospect of buying the building even more feasible, he said. Interested groups may call the Actors Gymnasium at (847) 328-2795 to learn more.

In addition, a big issue is a demand for more studio space. Actors Gymnasium operates a successful summer camp, a circus and performing arts camp, accommodating 60 children per session.

"The last I checked, we had about 40 kids on each wait list that we just had to turn away," Hernandez-DiStasi said, "because we had no way to accommodate them."

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