

Seeking \$30 Million to Renovate, Church Finds Help in Neighbors



David W. Dunlap/The New York Times

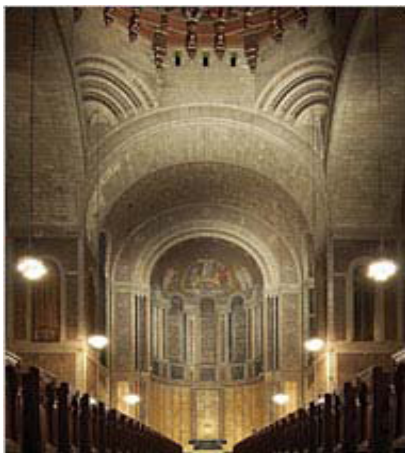
St. Bartholomew's Church, a historic landmark in Manhattan, sought to build a 59-story tower in the late 1980s and early '90s.

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Published: December 18, 2007

Foiled long ago in its plan to raise money by replacing its landmark community house with a 59-story office tower, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Park Avenue is now passing the plate among the very neighbors whose views would have been sliced by the skyscraper.

And the plate is coming back with hundreds of thousands of dollars in it.



New lighting is part of the plan in the \$30 million capital campaign undertaken by St. Bartholomew's Church, on Park Avenue.

Corporate neighbors to the north, south, east and west have all responded to St. Bartholomew's \$30 million capital campaign. The goals are to repair the failing exterior mosaic tiles of its colorful dome, to fix faulty drains that have led to major water damage, to better light the sacred space, to restore the terrace, and to create a new entrance serving both the church and the adjoining community house, the future of which is secure.

The church is appealing for help to New York as a whole, arguing that its presence in Midtown — its cafe, its social services, its cultural programs, its artistic patrimony and the breathing room it creates in the canyon of Park Avenue

— is a civic resource.

“We don't belong here, taking up space, unless we're open to the city and useful,” said the Rev. William McD. Tully, the rector.

This approach contrasts with a bitter landmark battle in the 1980s and early '90s, when St. Bartholomew's sought to redevelop the community house site, saying that the income from leasing its land would further its ministry. The Landmarks Preservation Commission said no. The fight went to the [Supreme Court](#), which refused to hear the church's constitutional challenge to its landmark designation.

The outcome was seen as a victory for historic preservation, but the episode drained and divided the congregation. And the church itself, between 50th and 51st Streets, suffered from years of inattention.

That is why the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has given \$1 million toward the restoration of the dome, on behalf of the Waldorf-Astoria, immediately to the south.

"If you don't fix it now, then it's going to be either extremely expensive to repair in the future or it could get to the point where you couldn't salvage what's there," said Steven M. Hilton, president and chief executive of the foundation.

Conceding that such a gift seemed to be outside the foundation's central humanitarian mission, Mr. Hilton nevertheless found a link.

"St. Bart's is more than a church," he said. "They serve something close to 80,000 meals a year to the homeless, and they have a 10-bed shelter. So you'd say, indirectly, the things St. Bart's is doing touch on one of our key interests."

Rudin Management Company, the owner of office buildings north and west of the church, recognizes St. Bartholomew's as an important institution and wants to be a "good neighbor," said John J. Gilbert III, the chief operating officer. He declined to specify the amount given.

From the opposite side of Park Avenue, contributions have also come from the Colgate-Palmolive Company, with headquarters at No. 300, and the Mutual of America Life Insurance Company, at No. 320. Most recently, the [New York State](#) Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation gave \$200,000 to help restore the dome.

Mr. Tully arrived as rector in 1994, after the landmark debacle had played out. His first priority, he said, was to rebuild church membership. Attendance at Sunday services has increased to 800 or 900, he said, from 150 or so in the mid-90s.

Now, the rector is focused on rehabilitating the 1918 main church, designed by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, and the 1928 community house.

Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects prepared a master plan for the church in 2004 that identified about \$100 million worth of needed work. Then the architects winnowed the menu down to the more urgent items.

Slightly more than \$17 million has been raised since the capital campaign was announced in October, Mr. Tully said. Most of the money has come from within the parish. He added that St. Bartholomew's still had to struggle against its image as a wealthy congregation, earned during the days when Vanderbilts worshiped there. The current endowment, about \$6 million, is one-third of what it was before the landmark fight, he said.

Mr. Tully said the opening of Café St. Bart's in 1995 — a year after contingency plans were developed to close the ailing church — drew employees from the companies that are now supporting the renovation. "The cafe, in a single stroke, projected to the street a sense of life," he said.

For the future, Mr. Tully envisions a place that would act as a forum for public debate and as a 24-hour-a-day sanctuary, for people of any faith or no faith. "If you can't get in anywhere else," he said, "there's some place you can *always* get in. And there's always a light on."