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DAILY NEWS

A crumbling church can help our flocks

By: Daniel Rivera
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Barry Williams for New York Daily News West Park Presbyterian Church is pictured Thursday, Nov. 17, 2022 in Manhattan, New York. (Barry Williams for New York Daily News)

In the heart of New York City, a historic opportunity has presented itself — one that could greatly expand the social work already being done by congregations like mine, where faith meets action in the pursuit of justice and compassion. The West Park Presbyterian Church at 86th and Amsterdam Ave. has a plan to do just that.

West Park is asking the Landmarks Preservation Commission to grant a hardship that would enable it to sell a crumbling building it can no longer afford to maintain. If approved, the bulk of the proceeds from the sale would be used to endow the West Park Presbyterian Church Social Justice Fund under the auspices of the Presbytery of NYC.

The Fund would deliver as much as \$900,000 annually to the Presbytery's member churches in underserved communities across the city to fund food, housing, and education programs, immigration services, historic preservation, and more. This unprecedented gift of \$25 million to \$30 million would increase the Presbytery's funding for aid to member churches by more than 350%.

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This is an opportunity to transform the lives of individuals and families across all five boroughs. It is the largest grant in the history of the Presbytery, and for congregations like mine, it will radically increase our ability to serve those in need.

Throughout my time as a pastor, I have seen firsthand the powerful impact that action rooted in faith can have on people's lives.

Each week, we provide services to our community members whose basic needs are not met by the system. We feed dozens of individuals with hot meals every Sunday. We provide clothing and basic items such as toiletries and hygiene products to anyone who needs them. We support new mothers with their postpartum journeys. We stand with the grieving during their times of loss and confusion, making sure that nobody ever feels alone.

Yet despite our best efforts, there are so many who remain untouched by our services due to a lack of funding. There is so much more we could do to help if we had the means.

With the grant of a hardship by LPC, we could do more for our community, and subsequently for the broader wellbeing of New York. We could expand our ESL program to foster community integration for our members eager to learn English. We could offer mental health counseling to individuals who are struggling.

We could provide workforce training for women seeking independence and empowerment. We could provide accessible legal counseling for those who can't access it. We could also provide showers and basic facilities to those who need them, further making our congregation not just a place of worship, but a place they can feel safe and secure.

These needs have long been unmet for our community, but this presents the opportunity to make them a reality. This money could help us build a comprehensive support system for the most vulnerable, making sure that they have the tools not just to survive, but to thrive.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' followers asked "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" And Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

These words are more than just Scripture: they are a call to action, a blueprint for how we — as a community of faith — need to engage with the world around us. We are called to serve those in need, not just out of obligation, but out of empathy and commitment to justice.

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The service of others not only helps the individual but acts as an investment in New York at large. When we invest in the wellbeing of those most in need, the whole community becomes a safer, more compassionate city — where every person is treated with respect and has the opportunity to thrive.

Too many New Yorkers are being left behind — struggling with the rising costs of food, child care, health care, and educational support.

I call for all individuals involved in this decision to consider the long-term and profound impact that the West Park Presbyterian Church Social Justice Fund could provide for those who need it most across all of New York City, creating a community where justice, compassion, and opportunity are available to everyone.

Rivera is moderator of the Presbytery of New York City and senior pastor of the First Spanish Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn.

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