

Northeast Portland church tells story of city's past, present and future

Every building tells a story -- of a developer's foresight, a family's evolution, an architect's mid-career crisis.

The church at Northeast Failing Street and Eighth Avenue doesn't look like much, yet offers a full-scale biography of Northeast Portland, its working-class past, culturally shifting present and, neighbors hope, a future that includes something more original and engaging than another bit of infill housing.

The building went up 108 years ago, one of a dozen or so churches founded by [Volga German](#) immigrants. These were ethnic Germans who immigrated from Russia and came to Oregon to help build the railroads. Enough landed in inner Northeast Portland, then the outskirts of the city, that the neighborhood came to be called "Little Russia," and "Roosian Town."

Many of these newcomers didn't speak English and had never lived in a city before. They built their own grocery stores, butcher shops and churches. Parishioners at St. Paul's Evangelical & Reformed Church, which moved into the two-story building at 801 N.E. Failing in 1904, sang hymns out of "Der Koestliche Schatz."

"A place like St. Paul's was where you knew you would see your friends and family, where you knew you'd find people who spoke your language and understood your customs," said Steve Schreiber, a retired [Port of Portland](#) executive and amateur historian who specializes in the Volga Germans. "When you went to church, you felt like you were going home."

Things began to change in the 1940s. During World War II, many people of German descent sought to minimize their ties to the old country. At the same time, African Americans, once essentially barred from owning property in Oregon, began settling in Northeast Portland. They were drawn by affordable homes and the proximity to the [Kaiser Shipyards](#).

The demographic shift sped up after a flood wiped out the Vanport neighborhood in 1948. "Little Russia" became the center of African American life in Portland, in part because banks refused to loan black families money to buy homes anywhere else.

As the neighborhood's racial makeup changed, many churches founded by Eastern European immigrants either moved to the suburbs or disbanded. St. Paul's was down to 21 members by Easter 1973, when its leaders sold the property to the Gethsemane Church of God in Christ. The predominantly African American congregation was led by Rev. R.L. Menefee and later by his son, Winfred Leon Menefee.

Services at Gethsemane were very different from St. Paul's -- gospel and soul music replaced German hymns -- but parishioners kept the mural behind the choir loft, a 12-by-6-foot depiction of Jesus tending to sheep and children. Its title is written in two languages: "Der Herr Ist Mine Hirte" and "The Lord is My Shepherd."

Just as St. Paul's had been a little slice of home for its early founders, Gethsemane was a second home to its members. And just as St. Paul's died, so did Gethsemane.

A keyboard and drum set still sit on the chancel and a dollar bill rests in a gold-tinted collection plate in a front row, but the church hadn't hosted services in several years when the younger Rev. Menefee died last spring.

Today, the building's white paint is faded and chipped and someone has slapped black tape over the sign listing worship hours. Renovations and

expansions have left the building more boxy than Biblical, and inside it smells musty. Dust coats the prayer books and old computer equipment on a desk in the pastor's downstairs office.

Black churches are dying or abandoning Northeast Portland today the same way Eastern European congregations did 40 years ago. Gentrification has brought a new population of people who are whiter, younger and less inclined to attend their neighborhood church.

"The circumstances are different, but the parallels are there," Schreiber said.

Menefee's sister put the church up for sale last fall. She's asking \$449,000. Realtor Tod Breslau has received numerous nibbles, most from builders intent on razing the church and putting up houses or a duplex.

"If you got really creative, you could do something very cool with what's there now. I thought it could be a terrific day care," said Breslau, a developer who helped turn a run-down 1960s motor lodge into the hip [Jupiter Hotel](#). "But there's a certain reality that's hard to escape."

That reality is financial. The land, which sits on a quiet street of modest cottages, is zoned for small-scale residential development. A builder can earn a larger profit by tearing down what's there and putting up three new homes - - what the law allows on this particular 7,500 square feet of land -- than by making the repairs and structural changes necessary to retrofit three condos inside the church. Any other use would require a costly permitting and rezoning effort.

"I wish there was a committee that could come together and talk about what we can do to make the best use out of this kind of building," said Mary Brown, a Portland real-estate agent who represents the sellers of three other Northeast Portland churches now on the market, all within a mile of the one on Northeast Failing. "The zoning code doesn't give much flexibility. It's a shame, because there are only so many of these structures left."

Even thriving churches find it hard to stay vibrant so close to the central city, she says. Most inner-city congregations lack parking lots. Parishioners who've moved to the suburbs have a certain loyalty, particularly if they grew up in a church, but they won't drive back into the city every Sunday if it requires a hunt for parking or a long walk from parking space to pew.

"When these churches were built, everybody walked everywhere, so parking wasn't an issue. When they changed hands 25 years ago, nobody wanted to go to Alberta Street to have brunch on Sunday morning, so parking wasn't an issue," Brown said. "Now parking is the issue."

Sabin neighborhood leaders say they'd talked to Rev. Menefee about finding a new use for the church before he died. They hope to preserve the building something similar to [TaborSpace](#), a nonprofit coffeehouse and gathering spot created in an unused portion of Southeast Portland's [Mt. Tabor Presbyterian Church](#).

"We have a neighborhood that is increasingly diverse. We need places where everyone can get together and celebrate the things we have in common," said Diane Benson, a member of the [Sabin Community Association](#) board. "More infill housing is fine. There are just other things we need more."

The odds favor infill, however; Menefee's sister wants to sell sooner rather than later, her real-estate agent says. She isn't interested in offering neighbors a discount.

-- [Anna Griffin](#)

Volga German churches

Northeast Portland was once home to a thriving community of Volga Germans, ethnic Germans who immigrated to the United States from Russia. Many of these newcomers did not speak English and were not used to living in cities. To cope, they built their own stores, schools and churches, enough

that a century ago many Portlanders knew the Northeast quadrant as "Little Russia." Here's a look at where some of those Volga German churches, the heart of the community, were originally located. Most of these Eastern European congregations made way for predominantly black churches in the period after World War II. For more information on this aspect of Portland history, see www.volgagermans.net, or [Concordia University's Volga German Studies program](#).