

Historic church looking for cash

'It has to remain a church, there is no question of it being sold and turned into condos,' an official says. 'But using the building exclusively as a place of worship is no longer viable'

BY ALAN HUSTAK, THE GAZETTE



The historic church at St. Eustache, where Patriote leader Jean-Olivier Chénier and 100 of his followers stood and fell against the British on Dec. 14, 1837.

Photograph by: ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

The historic church at St. Eustache that was the site of the decisive engagement between French-Canadian Patriotes and British forces during the Rebellion of 1837 is having trouble paying its bills and is looking for alternative sources of revenue to keep it open.

The church was built between 1780 and 1819 and was classified as a Quebec historic monument in 1970. But it is in need of hundreds of thousands of dollars for routine maintenance, incidental repairs, heating bills, electricity and insurance.

About 800 parishioners attend mass each week, which is not a big enough congregation to foot the bills.

"It has to remain a church, there is no question of it being sold and turned into condos," said Nycole Pepper, the head of the church's fabrique, the local parish committee responsible for building maintenance and management.

"But using the building exclusively as a place of worship is no longer viable.

"We have about 50 weddings, 150 funerals and 300 baptisms each year. Only 15 per cent of the 45,000 parishioners support us financially," Pepper said. "We get about \$11,000 a month in the collection plate, but our heating bills alone are \$55,000 a year. "

The choir loft has closed because it is no longer structurally sound, and operating expenses continue to outstrip the

church's income.

The Quebec government has pitched in, but government heritage grants fund only 70 per cent of repairs.

"Because fewer and fewer of the faithful contribute to its upkeep, the church has become a white elephant for the community," said St. Eustache Mayor Claude Carignan, who has set up a committee to see how the church might be put to better use.

Among the ideas that have been mentioned are using the building as a recording studio or turning it into a community centre, a library or a museum.

Quebec nationalists regard the church not so much as a religious shrine but a patriotic symbol that occupies the same place in their hearts that the Alamo does in the hearts of Texans.

It was in the church that Patriote leader Jean-Olivier Chénier and 100 of his followers stood and fell against the British.

The church facade still bears traces of British cannon fire sustained during the battle on Dec. 14, 1837. Chénier and his followers occupied the church but were forced to flee once the British set fire to the sanctuary. Chénier was killed during the fighting.

French-Canadian nationalist organizations like the St. Jean Baptiste Society and the Jeunes Patriotes du Québec, which parade to the church each Nov. 24, Journée des Patriotes, contribute nothing to the building's upkeep.

Michael Jasmin, the parish priest, says the parish no longer has the resources needed to keep the church open.

"A church belongs to its parishioners - a community of the faithful built it and it is their pride that keeps it going," he said.

"If you no longer have the support of the parish, the diocese cannot guarantee the future of a building."



Rolland Proulx has volunteered to do odd jobs, watch duty and repairs at the church all his life.

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