

REDDING SENTINEL

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New life for the old church *Georgetown Bible Church sold to local foundation*

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Photo by Richard Wenning

For more than 120 years the imposing Georgetown Bible Church, built of local granite, has been a focal point of the Georgetown Historic District. With its purchase by the BE foundation and envisioned use as a center for arts and culture, there's a new life in store for the building in the heart of the community.

The historic Georgetown Bible Church at 5 N Main Street has been purchased by the Redding-based Be Foundation. The foundation plans for the church to become an arts and cultural space for Redding and surrounds. Extensive renovations will be required, far exceeding the purchase price of \$600,000.

"This is an important gateway property for the Georgetown Historic District and stands at a crossroads for the towns of Redding, Weston, Wilton, and Ridgefield in Fairfield County. We view this as an opportunity to weave the historic Church back into the fabric of our community and achieve both social and economic returns on Be Foundation's investment," said Richard Wenning, Be Foundation's Executive Director.

"Helping this historic Church

become a vital community resource again reflects our commitment to Redding. It also fits with the values of SpreadMusicNow, the music education non-profit Rich and I founded in 2013, which supports the arts to build creative and engaged communities," Be Foundation's founder and chairman, Greg Young added. "Looking ahead to the redevelopment of the Gilbert & Bennett Wire Mill, we are excited to see what the Church building can become in that chapter of its historic life. In the interim, we look forward to discussing ideas for the building's use with the Town of Redding, its residents, and local organizations interested in using it for performances, events, exhibits, and more," Wenning said.

Originally known as the Gilbert Memorial Church, for the Gilbert family that made its construction

possible, the granite building was completed in 1902. The congregation was affiliated with Methodists in its early days, but by the time the Church was built it was for the Congregational Society of Georgetown. In 1944, unhappy with the direction of the Congregational Church, the congregation sought independence and since then has been wholly independent. The Church has been known as the Georgetown Bible Church since 1965.

The granite for the beautiful Church was quarried in Branchville under the direction of geologists from Yale University. Built in the Gothic Revival Style, the magnificent structure with its stained glass, tower and bell, has stood the test of time and will continue to do so following renovations. The Church has many features found in larger churches

built in this style at that time, including buttresses and pointed arch windows, a square main tower, and a round turret with a conical roof.

To the rear of the church is a small cemetery containing the graves of Edwin and Elizabeth Gilbert.

The Sentinel was able to put questions to the new buyers.

1. How will the renovation be managed? Have you selected a design firm? Will you seek resident input? Will the renovation include ADA compliance?

At this point, we are in a discussion and research phase. Rich Wenning will oversee the renovation on behalf of Be Foundation and we will select a team to plan and execute on the renovation that shares our vision for both process and outcome. We have had a building envelope analysis completed and an environmental screening and are talking to different potential firms for next steps. The renovations

needed will be extensive and may take two years to complete. Ensuring that the property is accessible to our community is important to us.

2. Once the building is completed, how will it be managed? Will you set up a board? How will you incorporate resident input?

We expect to manage the building as a nonprofit community space and SpreadMusicNow, the public charity Greg and I founded, will be involved. We will consider governance changes as the redevelopment process progresses.

However, long before the building opens, we will solicit input from potential partners and local residents related to the mix of possible uses. In fact, if any of your readers have ideas for how the space could be used or are interested in joining us as investors or other stakeholders, they should send them to GraniteChurch@BeFoundation.org. We hope to model the kind of transparency and community engagement around the Church that will be necessary to also bring about the redevelopment vision for the much larger Gilbert and Bennett Wire Mill campus.

3. Could you expand on your ideas for how the space will be used? Will it be available for rent?

Yes, we do expect to offer it for rent for private and town events. SpreadMusicNow will likely use it for a concert series it hosts but we also envision making it available to other organizations and neighboring towns for concerts, speakers, films, art exhibits, weddings, historical tours and other purposes. The basement could become space for art exhibits, music education, food preparation, small businesses,

artist studios and community meetings.

4. Are there any use restrictions given that its land use designation is as a church? Being in BC zone should mitigate that land use designation but just checking.

We understand that the zoning for the building itself will need to change but not the property. I look forward to learning about all of the steps necessary to bring about the redevelopment as a key step toward the larger Gilbert and Bennett project.

5. Is the Georgetown Village Restoration group involved at all?

We have talked about the renovation of the Church with representatives of Georgetown Village Restoration, Inc. (GVR) and look forward to partnering with them as much as possible. Our goal is to have widespread town support for the redevelopment and that means listening and partnering to bring about a great outcome.

6. Do you have plans for the 0.88 acre land itself?

It's a lovely property bordered by the Norwalk River on a shady side. We could imagine some café seating there and local restaurants or food trucks serving food at community gatherings. Along the roadside, perhaps a nice pollinator pathway to model all the beauty and benefit of native wildflowers. We look forward to gathering ideas. ■