

November 12, 2014

## Christian Church sells to Neighboring Jewish congregation



The First Church of Christian Scientists at 8685 S.E. 47th St. sits on three acres of land just west of Island Crest Way. It is considered a classic example of mid-century public architecture. It all seems b'sheret, Hebrew for "it was meant to be," said Dr. Edward Epstein of Shevet Achim.

— *image credit: Howard Goldstein / Special to the Reporter*

- by REPORTER STAFF, Mercer Island Reporter Staff
- Today at 5:00AM

On Nov. 7, two Mercer Island faith communities announced the completion of a transaction that will maintain one of Mercer Island's most prominent churches as a house of worship.

First Church of Christ, Scientist, Mercer Island announced the sale of its church property to the Jewish congregation Shevet Achim for \$4.5 million. The sale includes the 10,500-square-foot mid-century-designed church building and approximately three acres of parking and wooded grounds. The property is just west of Island Crest Way at S.E. 47th Street.

For the past 20 years, the Shevet Achim congregation has been leasing space from the Northwest Yeshiva High School and plans to commence its services at its new location next month. The Christian Science Church is now leasing space from the United Methodist Church on First Hill in the north end of the Island and began holding its services there on Nov. 2.

The synagogue counts 90 families with 100 children as members. It had outgrown its rented space and sought a building of its own. The church's central location, only three blocks from the Shevet Achim's current quarters, was crucial since many congregants, in observance of Jewish law, walk to synagogue on Shabbat and holidays.

"We've been here 53 years and love this place, but as it says in Ecclesiastes, there is a time and season for everything under the sun, and it's our time to move," said Nancy Bushore, chairman of the Executive Board of the Christian Science Church. "We're going to take a year or so to do some strategic planning about our future. We now have funds such as we've never had before, and we want to be good stewards of it."

The property was never listed for sale. It took 18 months for the two parties to close the sale.

It was very important to the Christian Scientists that the property remained within the faith community.

"The property would yield about nine residential lots," Bushore said. "But we think the residents and community are better off with a broad group of strong religious institutions on the Island."

Architectural preservationists commended the commitment to keeping the church in service.

"The building is a treasure," observed Eugenia Woo of Historic Seattle and the Mid-Century architectural preservationist group, Docomomo WEMA. "It's wonderful that the Christian Scientists chose to sell to their Jewish neighbors."

"We saw this as a once-in-a-generation opportunity," explained Dr. Edward Epstein, of Shevet Achim. "Together with the church, we overcame numerous obstacles to achieve the transaction. It all seems b'sheret, Hebrew for 'it was meant to be.'"

"We are grateful for this blessing as it will allow us to achieve the vision we have for our congregation," he added.

The City of Mercer Island carefully reviewed Shevet Achim's plans and found that the new owner would preserve the church property's existing conditional use.

In order to help raise enough capital to make the purchase, Shevet Achim will, subject to the city's approval, sub-plat and sell three housing lots on the westernmost edge of the property. JayMarc Homes will apply to the city to develop the property.

The Christian Science congregation has had a 90-year presence on Mercer Island. Ironically, it once owned the current United Methodist property on S.E. 24th Street. Then in 1957, it bought the three-acre parcel and built its church building in 1961.

“Both our congregations are members of the Mercer Island Clergy Association, an ecumenical group,” said John Chae, United Methodist pastor. “We welcome them back openly and wholeheartedly. Here, they are able to hold their own services in our sanctuary, conduct Sunday school classes in our Fellowship Hall, and even have an office.”

“What blesses one, blesses all,” Bushore said. “We are pleased to entrust our beautiful church to our friends at Shevet Achim.”

### **By the numbers**

The First Church of Christian Scientists have sold their 10,000-plus s.f. building on a 133,600 s.f. parcel to the Congregation Shevet Achim for \$4.5 million. The church was built in 1961 and was designed by Richard W. Peterson of Durham, Anderson and Freed, a firm known for its designs of churches throughout Puget Sound.