

RISSE reimagining a former church as sanctuary for all

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Shortly after the [Refugee and Immigrant Support Services of Emmaus](#) assumed ownership in November of the former Emmaus United Methodist Church in the Pine Hills neighborhood of Albany, [a windstorm swept its largest stained-glass window from its frame](#) and into interior trusses that seemed to impossibly shield it from shattering.

The proverbial winds of change were made literal as the center panels depicting a religious scene needed to be removed so the window could be hoisted and braced back into place, unintentionally launching the first of several planned renovations to transform the former place of worship to a sanctuary for all.

“We want to make the space more non-denominational so that everyone, no matter their background, their country of origin, their religion, feel welcome,” said Susan Kirchheimer, president of RISSE’s board of directors.

On June 23, RISSE will host its first public celebration of its newly acquired space with exhibited visual art, musical performances and guest speakers at [its annual World Refugee Day event](#). That day will mark the start of the ever-growing non-profit’s next chapter, all occurring in the midst of a migrant crisis and swirling political debates on immigration.

History

RISSE arose out of programs created by Emmaus United Methodist Church congregants to help Rwandans and Congolese in 2007 after political and military strife in their homelands brought many refugees to Albany. What began as a resource for newcomers to find jobs and housing soon grew to include case management services, English language classes and an afterschool program for children up to 12, and RISSE became a standalone non-profit unaffiliated with the Methodist church.

For Diane Mbombo-Tite, who first arrived in Albany a decade ago after fleeing the Democratic Republic of the Congo with her toddler and a baby on the way, RISSE was her lifeline. It’s where she took English courses, navigated her asylum application, learned how to dress for the new climate, gained housing and healthcare and found refuge.

“It was as simple as just finding a place where you feel that you’re not alone because there are other people in your situation — that comfort and safe zone,” said Mbombo-Tite, who will be a guest speaker at the World Refugee Day event. With support from RISSE, she went from being homeless to founding AKULA, providing nationwide interpretation and translation for refugees in 150 languages.

As RISSE's programs grew, the group went from using only a section of the church building to utilizing the neighboring four-square-style parsonage, which was rebuilt following a fire in 2014, and satellite English language classrooms through a partnership with Hudson Valley Community College.

“Right now, our clients cannot fit in only this building and the other building,” said Francis Sengabo, RISSE co-founder and family services director, as he gestured between the parsonage, which holds RISSE's family services offices, and the church.

As for Emmaus United Methodist Church, it was resolved at the annual conference of the United Methodist Church in June 2023 that the church was no longer being supported or maintained by the present congregation and officially had it closed. By Nov. 30, the building and all the related property were acquired by RISSE.

Sanctuary of Emmaus United Methodist Church, now owned by RISSE on Monday, June 3, 2024 in Albany, N.Y. The group is working with RPI architecture students and professors to reimagine the design and use of the historic building to create a safe environment for programming to support the region's refugee community. Lori Van Buren/Times Union

Designing sanctuary

There are expected challenges with approaching the adaptive reuse of an 18,000 square-foot, century-plus old collegiate Gothic building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Kirchheimer said. The church needs a new roof, the oil furnaces need to be replaced and there is an asbestos abatement in the boiler room.

But the building's religious roots present another set of considerations. For help, RISSE has partnered with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute architecture students, led by professor Matt Burgermaster, to consider how design impacts traumatized communities.

“Susan encouraged us to think about the symbolism of the altar, of the stained glass, of everything in there, and how to, on the one hand, respect those things, respect the history of the building as it is, but also recognize that it potentially could be re-traumatizing,” said Burgermaster, noting that some refugees and asylum seekers are fleeing persecution.

The collaboration has given Burgermaster's students a real-world opportunity to explore the intersection of architecture and social justice — some student-dreamed designs included recycling elements of the pipe organ as a light fixture and clearing the pews for a basketball court — and it has also helped RISSE plan for some more immediate changes.

The three smaller windows depicting Christian scenes will be removed, with plans to go to a new home, and replaced with neutral glass similar to the others. The large, heavy pews will be removed, hopefully in time for the World Refugee Day event, to make the sanctuary more adaptable, and RISSE is working with RPI to imagine solutions to replace the chain

link fencing, another potentially triggering design element, and the wheelchair accessible ramp currently dividing its outdoor space without sacrificing security or safety.

“When you understand architecture as part of our social world, you recognize these simple things,” Burgermaster said. “How do you make a space inviting, how do you give the sense that somebody cares about you.”

Creating community

The to-do list of projects hasn’t deterred the RISSE team from dreaming, even putting some ideas into action to make the former church “a multipurpose, multifunctional space that can not only enhance the experience of our families and our clients but provide opportunities for the community to connect with our families, share common experiences and connect through art and other universal passions,” Kirchheimer said.

At the World Refugee Day event, RISSE will unveil an art installation gifted by RPI, said Kirchheimer, walking through a maze of paper taped to the floor mapping out the installation. It will double as a gallery, and artist Shumon Ahmed – born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital – will lead a solo exhibition to launch the gallery.

His multidisciplinary show “Manzil,” featuring projections, soundscapes, sculptures and more, is named after the Arabic word meaning “seeking a home or destination.” It’s a concept the 48-year-old has been exploring for 48 years, Ahmed said, because he grew up moving from home to home across the Indian subcontinent, Australia and Europe before arriving in the United States; he now lives in Albany.

“How do you define home? Is home just a building that has four walls where you just seek refuge, or is it something else?” Ahmed said. “Is it memory of a home, is it longing for a home? Is it trying to find your peace, your inner peace, connecting to something, connecting to someone?”

The artist traveled back to Dhaka to gather objects for the show and create more for it. His phone interview from there came in the midst of collaborations with a musician composing music for the esraj – a rare long-necked, stringed instrument used in Sikh, Tagore and classical Hindustani music – and a rickshaw artist, who painting tiny birds on one of Ahmed’s calligraphy works. Showing “Manzil,” his first solo exhibition in the United States, at a former church will add another layer of meaning to his work.

“It’s an old monument of seeking spiritual peace and freedom,” Ahmed said. “That is manzil for many, many millions of people.”

‘It’s hard to say no’

RISSE Executive Director Daniel Butterworth has his own dreams for the building: expanding after-school programming for kids ages 13 to 18, a service that is lacking not only at RISSE but across the region; adding more adult programs; becoming a mutual aid

space where RISSE clients can host their own events; transforming the commercial-grade kitchen downstairs into RISSE Cafe, tapping into the community-building found over food.

But those dreams are often overshadowed by the urgent demand for basic-level survival needs. Since starting at RISSE just under three years ago, Butterworth oversaw three major newcomer influxes. The [first followed the fall of Kabal](#), then [Ukrainians arrived seeking refuge](#) from the war with Russia. Now, RISSE and a network of grassroots organizations are trying to help [the migrants bused from New York City](#). Minus the after-school program, every service RISSE offers is overcapacity and underfunded and has been since the migrant crisis began a year ago.

“For all of us who are operating in this space, we've been running well beyond capacity because it's hard to say no to someone in need when they're sitting right in front of you,” said Butterworth, emotion welling in his eyes.

RISSE has tried to stay “nimble” to meet the demands, including adapting some services to be mobile so staff can [meet migrants at the hotels where they're staying](#), and leaning into local partnerships and grant writing to meet the demands.

“It's been a lift but we've done it because it's why we're here. It's important,” Butterworth said. “The folks who are arriving now are our future neighbors and colleagues and small business owners.”