

## Weekend Break: Parish finds a home in a historic Astoria church

By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Mar 11, 2022



As light shines in from the floor-to-ceiling window on the southwest side of St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church and Father Sergey Kakorin flips on the mid-century pendant lights of colored glass, the nave is filled with warmth amid a blustery February coastal rainy day outside. Above us, the bare wood ceiling swoops up in an inverted arch like two hands coming together for prayer. The glulam beams curve along the tongue-and-groove boards giving the appearance of a Viking ship setting sail toward Young's Bay and beyond. Fitting for a parish named after the patron saint of mariners and sailors.

St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church came to the North Coast in 2012 as Holy Nativity Eastern Orthodox Mission from Kelso, Washington, but after much contemplation and prayer, changed the name of their parish “in observance of its service to our local seafaring community” after a saint who was known for his sea voyages to found monasteries and spread the gospel. Weekly services were held at St. Francis de Sales Church in Hammond and while the space worked well for worship, the parish yearned for a permanent home. In 2018, the little green church, covered in blue tarps and nestled in a pocket of Alameda Ave., was discovered by a couple in the parish. The church belonged to First Congregational United Church of Christ and had sustained significant storm damage from the previous year.

Worshippers to this space date back to 1896 when a group of Finnish immigrants decided to organize an independent, non-denominational church that officially became the Astoria Finnish Evangelical Lutheran National Congregation, but feelings of isolation began to grow from their independence and the church gradually evolved into the Finnish Congregational Church then eventually the First Congregational United Church of Christ. Their first building, constructed by fifteen men who each donated a week of work, was located at 245 W. Exchange St. and was used by the congregation for over 50 years. When the aging Uniontown building became too much to maintain, the congregation decided to relocate. In 1954, the members acquired seven lots in the Astor Court area, across from Robert Gray School, and began to worship in a Craftsman style house moved from the present site of the high school. Ten years later, they were breaking ground for a new church designed by Brown & Brown, Architects, AIA.



Ebba Wicks Brown was daughter of Astoria's prominent architect, John Wicks, and was the first woman in Oregon registered by examination as an architect in 1942. Her work is recognized in her mid-century modern designs dotted throughout downtown Astoria and seen at the Zion Lutheran Church, the Astoria Public Library, and the U.S. Bank, just to name a few. In her buildings, including this church, every detail is intentional, from the pendant lights to the stunning view of Saddle Mountain.

The post-war trend of moving away from building neoclassical churches toward using more modern designs continued to prevail in the US during the 1960s, but there was already a movement veering away from the steel, the glass, and the boxiness of mid-century modern churches back toward the traditional – toward making a church look like a church.

This church, surrounded by trees and houses, still carries particular ecclesiastical motifs, yet lacks any intimidation by traditional architectural language of a more city-centered church. It resembles a modern take on traditional Nordic designs with its simplicity and functionality. The southwest façade offers a high pitched gable roof that peaks at the top then swoops down into two curves leading to lower pitched eaves designed for bitter winds and rain.

In 2018, the St. Brendan parish knew they had found their church and after signing a two-year lease, got to work cleaning up the building that had been suffering from dry rot, leaks, and insect infestation. They replaced the roof, repaired and resealed the large chancel window in the nave, scrubbed the floors, and repainted the walls. The exterior is in the process of being repainted.

Upon purchasing the church in 2020, they began preparations to build and install their iconostasis, a wall of icons that will separate the nave from the sanctuary. The parish's commitment to keeping the Nordic flair and celebrating the heritage of the church remains evident in their plans. Inspired by St. Brendan's ship, built from oak and tanned ox hides, the iconostasis will be constructed with leather straps and the oak pews left behind by the previous congregation. Before the oak was planed for reuse at Olney Mill, brass plaques from the pews were removed and will be put on display for visitors to the church.

Future visions for St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church involve turning the house behind the church, the same that had been brought over by the Finnish Congregation, into a Sunday School, installing a new cross, and rebuilding a bell tower reminiscent of the original Brown & Brown design.

In January of this year, Father Sergey Kakorin became the new priest to the parish and services are now available every weekend. Those interested to learn more about the parish can visit their website at [www.orthodoxastoria.org](http://www.orthodoxastoria.org). Be sure to check their calendar of events. For more information about the church building, Ebba Wicks Brown, and mid-century modern architecture, check in with the Lower Columbia Preservation Society at their website, [www.lcpsociety.org](http://www.lcpsociety.org).