



RENT FOR A DAY

or buy for a lifetime

GETTING MARRIED IN A CHURCH
OR BUYING A CHURCH

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Walking down the aisle, ringing bells, and throwing rice remain wedding traditions even as church attendance continues to decline. In this month's real estate story, *Main Street* discovers what is involved in getting married in a church, and also looks at churches available for sale – in case you'd like to buy your own.

Today less than 40% of all weddings in the United States include a church ceremony. Saying wedding vows at the altar is not like getting married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel – it requires research and at least six months advance planning in most churches. The approach, requirements, and fees vary enormously from church to church.

Possibly the least traditional church venue in the area is the former home of Alice's Restaurant, the Arlo Guthrie Center in Great Barrington, MA (see photo above) that was decommissioned as an Episcopalian Church in 1964. The center permits couples to devise their own ceremony and doesn't require advance religious counseling. The space attracts eclectic couples who want to be married in a church without the strictures of traditional religion. Apache prayers, and guitars are welcome. Catering facilities are also available on site, although a couple must apply for their own event specific liquor license to serve alcohol.

Smithfield in Shekomeko

The recently renovated, historic Greek Revival Smithfield Presbyterian Church in Shekomeko is another church that welcomes everyone. Reverend Douglas Grandgeorge, who officiates at weddings as far away

as the top of the Empire State Building, encourages all couples to consider the Smithfield Church for a wedding. There's no set charge, although most couples make a donation of \$200 to \$300 to the church. Musicians and the organist are a separate fee. While there haven't been recent weddings at the First Baptist Church in Millerton because of the aging congregation, the minister is willing to marry anyone once he "determines where they stand spiritually." Baptists believe in "free will" giving, so the contribution is whatever the couple wishes.

Tradition, counseling, and fees

The reinvigorated Lyall Memorial Federated Church, an attractive stone interdenominational church in Millbrook, has wedding fees clearly displayed on the church website. These include a refundable \$325 deposit, \$750 for the minister, \$150 for the Sexton (custodian), \$300 for the building, and \$200 for the organist. An application and three pre-ceremony counseling sessions with the minister are required.

St. John's Episcopal Church in Salisbury is an example of a more traditional choice. Before agreeing to conduct a wedding, Father David Sellery wants to get to know the couple and understand why they want to be married at St. John's. He will ask prospective couples, "Why does this place make sense? Why St. John's instead of the town hall down the street?" He offers three to four premarital counseling sessions that

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Above: Any couple can get married at the Arlo Guthrie Center in Great Barrington and devise their own ceremony. Photo courtesy of the Arlo Guthrie Center.



constructively touch on practical matrimonial issues like finances, children, and even careers.

There is flexibility on fees, depending on the couple's financial means. Expect honorariums for the priest, sexton, and organist, and a \$500 fee for the church. Father Sellery does not permit couples to create their own vows and sticks with the traditional Episcopal service from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

There are no flash cameras allowed during the ceremony and no rice thrown outside. "At least three to six months and as much as a year are helpful to plan around the church calendar, concerts, and vacations."

Catholicism in Amenia

For couples where at least one person is Catholic, The Immaculate Conception Church in Amenia is another option. Father Kent Wilson presides over the parish and expects to conduct two informational interviews and then three pre-cana evening conferences with the prospective bride and groom.

"Weddings are so expensive, we try not to charge very much." Immaculate Conception's standard fee is \$200 for the use of church and the service, and \$200 for the organist. The right to utilize the building for a rehearsal is typically included at all churches.

Want to buy your own church?

It's estimated that over 4,000 churches close every year in the United States, and that there are half as many churches now as there were a 100 years ago. New York State data indicates that 16 churches were sold in Columbia and Dutchess County since 2007 at an average sale price of about \$550,000. And churches will continue to be decommissioned and sold unless they are surrounded by a cemetery, like St. Patrick's in Mil-lerton which is closed, but available for funerals.

The Presbyterian Church in Ame-

nia on Route 22 recently closed, and according to Reverend Grand-george, the priority will be to find a use that benefits the community. "If we sell it to a ping pong parlor the price will be much different than an activity that will benefit the people of Amenia."

Church repurposing

Just as the cost of weddings varies enormously so does the listing price of churches for sale. There are three types of church structures on the market: recently decommissioned churches, former churches that have been made into residences, and former churches that have already been adapted for commercial use as restaurants, gyms, antique stores, and art galleries.

Christ Church in Canaan

The most magnificent house of worship for sale at the moment (in this writer's opinion) is Christ Church in North Canaan, CT, which was closed in 2012 because of a dwindling congregation. Designed by noted Victorian Gothic architect Richard Upjohn, the 1845 stone church has hard wood floors, a slate roof and stained glass windows. (See photo, and refer to November 2015 *Main Street* for a more complete history and description).

Included for the asking price of \$345,000 are the 2,600 square foot church, a freestanding clarion, and a two-story 2,500 square foot parish hall overlooking Canaan's historic railroad depot. That's less than \$70 a square foot! The church is being sold as a commercial building and the stained-glass windows, pews, and altar furnishings are included only if valued by the buyer. Otherwise the Dioceses retains the right to remove them and save them for another church.

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Above top: Renowned English architect Richard Upjohn designed Christ Church in Canaan. The church, separate belfry and parish house are for sale for \$345,000. Photo courtesy of Juliet Moore of Elyse Harney Real Estate. Above: Already converted into a three-bedroom home is this 1871 church in Mill River Village in the Town of New Marlborough, MA on the market for \$699,000. Photo courtesy of Steve Weisz of William Pitt Sotheby's International.

This church is a home

The church in Mill River Village in the Town of New Marlborough, MA was converted to a family home in the late 1970's. The residence sits on a knoll overlooking the small village and enjoys low property taxes, according to listing broker Steve Weisz of William Pitt Sotheby's International. Weisz immediately responded to the unique space.

"It's a perfect classic New England clapboard church that was built in 1871. Creative people look at the house – ballet dancers, musicians, and artists. The biggest challenge in selling a church home is lack of comparable structures for the purpose of pricing, getting a mortgage, etc. There really is nothing like it."

Originally put on the market for \$950,000 in 2014, the elegant home is now listed at \$699,000. As with any unique building, it takes time to find the right buyer.

Churches as commercial spaces

The restoration of the former Christian Science Church in Great Barrington by custom jewelers McTeigue & McClelland is an imaginative repurposing of what was built as a house in 1851, and then occupied by the Christian Science Church for 90 years. The church had received offers from big box stores to tear the building down, but decided to sell it to McTeigue and McClelland to preserve the historic stone building

which stands prominently at the south entrance to Great Barrington. It took over a year to bring the building up to code with firewalls, sprinklers, and handicap access, and to create a large airy showroom, offices and workshop (see photo above and related article on page 6). Brides and grooms from all over the world now visit the showroom to select engagement rings and wedding bands.

The former 1836 church next to Peck's Supermarket in Pine Plains, NY became a Grange Hall in 1932 and then Balsamo Antiques in 1997 (see photo). The 1,728 square foot building has a half bath and is zoned as a commercial multiple use small structure. When owner Steve Abeles and his partner bought the building, there was a hole in the roof and the inside had been gutted. The pair insulated the walls, added a second floor and staircase, and opened for business. "Originally it was a hobby for us to sell merchandise, but the business took off and we quit our jobs in fashion and had a new career." Marilee Taubman, the listing broker with Sotheby's International Realty in Millbrook, imagines the building as a live/work space and has listed the property as either commercial or residential.

Churches are an important part of every community's religious, cultural, and architectural heritage. They need to be honored and preserved. Often that means finding new uses for them so they remind us of our past and continue to be part of our daily lives. •



Above top: The former 1852 Christian Science Church in Great Barrington was originally a home and after a year of renovation is now the workroom and showcase of jewelers McTeigue & McClelland. Photo courtesy of McTeigue and McClelland. Above: What's the next life for the former church, Grange Hall and antique store in Pine Plains – now on the market for \$379,000? Photos courtesy of Steve Abeles and Peter Greenough. Left: The New Marlboro church at night.

