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Booted from city schools, churches search for new homes

[CORRINE LESTCH & ERIN DURKIN](#)

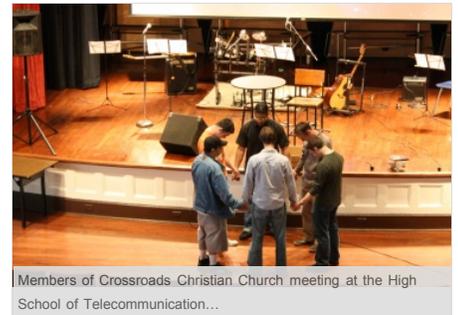
Tuesday, February 21, 2012

The city's move to boot churches from public schools is forcing congregations around the city to get creative.

At Heavenly Vision Christian Center's Inwood branch, congregants are literally out on the street - holding Sunday services with about 350 people in front of I.S. 52, where they used to meet.

Displaced from their meeting spots in city schools, about 70 churches around the city are holding services in the street, catering halls, homes, and other churches.

Congregants "just don't want to stop worshiping God, and this idea came mainly from them. When we held a meeting last Sunday, they said, 'Pastor, we are going to have service regardless, even if it's in the street,'" said Rev. Sal Sabino, whose church also has a Bedford Park branch.



Members of Crossroads Christian Church meeting at the High School of Telecommunication...

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"We are planning on changing the name of our church to the Church in the Street," Sabino said. "No matter what, we will not stop worshiping."

A judge issued an injunction last week giving the churches a 10 day reprieve, but an appeals court narrowed it to only apply to the Bronx Household of Faith, which led a long legal fight.

In Bay Ridge, the Crossroads Christian Church is meeting at the catering hall at Dyker Beach Golf Course. But since the rent at the golf course is almost double what they were paying at the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology, they can only meet there once a month.

The rest of the time, they'll meet in small groups at congregants' homes, with Pastor Paul Curtis addressing the flock by video conference. "We could easily lose people, in fact I'm confident we will lose some," Curtis said. "We hope it doesn't blow up in our face."

Councilman Vincent Gentile (D-Bay Ridge) who assisted Crossroads, said finding space for the homeless churches is tough because many churches are already doubled and tripled up. "It is hypocritical for the Mayor to disallow church groups to rent space from the city when in fact the city currently rents space from churches" for schools, he said.

City lawyer Jane Gordon said the Department of Education is "legitimately concerned about public schools being affiliated with a particularly religious belief or practice, and will continue to enforce its policy."

The city never moved to revoke a permit that Grace Fellowship Church in Sunnyside claimed right after the injunction, so they were able to return to P.S. 150 Sunday. "Our plan is to meet again at least one more time," said Rev. John Storck, whose backup plan is to double up with a sister congregation in Astoria. He said nearby churches wish they could help, but are already booked all day Sundays.

Two Park Slope groups, Park Slope Presbyterian Church and Sovereign Grace City Church, were able to get space in other churches, but only by moving their Sunday services to the afternoon. "Everybody loses. Our church is inconvenienced. The schools lose revenue," said Park Slope Presbyterian Pastor Matt Brown.

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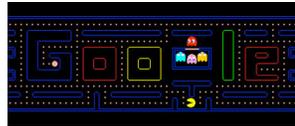
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