

## NEW SCHOOL TO PRESERVE CHURCH SANCTUARY

By Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter - June 15, 2011



**MONTREAL** — When Shimshon Hamerman was growing up, he would never have dreamed of even entering a church.

**Head of School Shimshon Hamerman stands in the former Anglican church bought by Solomon Schechter Academy.**

“My parents would have killed me; or, if you prefer a pun, they would have crucified me,” he said.

Yet, Hamerman, who would become an Orthodox rabbi, is the one who convinced Solomon Schechter Academy (SSA), the largest Jewish elementary school in Montreal, to buy a neighbouring church for its expansion.

What’s more, Hamerman, the head of school, persuaded the board and parent community that the exterior and sanctuary of the former St. Matthew’s Anglican Church be altered as little as possible.

“We are looking to preserve the integrity of the building, while minimizing any offence to anyone,” Hamerman said.

That means its numerous stained glass windows, altar, pulpit, pews and massive organ will remain untouched. The only items that have been removed are the crosses and statues of the apostles.

Outside there is no mistaking this was a church with its steeple and soaring bell

tower. A cross of glass blocks remains embedded in the bricks.

"It's simply gorgeous," said Hamerman, of the ornately carved dark wooden furnishings and colourful depictions of biblical scenes on the windows. That stained glass has heritage value because it was made by the Canadian artist Charles William Kelsey, he points out.

The sale was finalized May 31 with the signing in the office of Barry Clark, the Anglican Bishop of Montreal, by Hamerman and other school officials.

The price was not made public, but Hamerman said, "it was a tremendous deal." With the renovations, the school needs to raise close to \$3 million, he said.

The property, on Macdonald Avenue in Snowdon, is kitty-corner to the backyard playground of SSA's main campus, next to Shaare Zion Congregation. It's a huge piece of real estate, more than the school actually needs, but it came as a package.

In addition to the main church, built in 1937, there is a two-storey school building and a large finished basement, as well as a house, the manse, which was the minister's home. There are also sizable, well-landscaped grounds.

"It was an issue, no doubt," Hamerman said of moving into a former Christian house of worship. "But fortunately, our lay leadership has the foresight to see beyond these issues."

He doubts SSA will lose any students.

He points out that Jewish children are exposed to Christian symbolism everywhere in Quebec, and that it was not uncommon for synagogues in Montreal to be established in former churches in the Jewish community's early history.

Rabbi Mordechai Bulua, who has taught in Jewish schools, does object. "How does a Jewish school allow impressionable young Jewish children to learn about Judaism in a building replete with religious Christian symbols?" he wrote in a letter. "...Not only is [Hamerman's] approach decidedly unorthodox, but it makes a mockery of Judaism."

Although independent of the synagogue, SSA is affiliated with the Conservative movement and is traditional in its orientation; boys wear kippot during religious studies, prayer and while eating, and all Jewish studies are in Hebrew. It has Ashkenazi and Sephardi students.

SSA, and in particular Hamerman, who has been with the school for 30 years, had a close relationship with St. Matthew's. The church was the designated evacuation site for the school in the event of emergency (it only had to be used once.) "I always had the keys to the church. I never had to call," said Hamerman, who holds a PhD in theology from the Université de Montréal. "I remember the rector at the time telling me, 'These God-given premises are

yours to use whenever you need.”

The church was also visited for the mandatory ethics and religious culture course, introduced by Quebec a couple of years ago, and for dance festival rehearsals.

Hamerman was guest speaker at the church’s final service last month, when the building was deconsecrated and the congregation celebrated its 100th birthday, addressing the assembled from the altar. He recalled the kindness and welcome its clergy and members had always shown.

Once a bustling centre with a 1,000 members, the church shut its doors because it no longer had enough people to keep going.

The sanctuary will not be used for educational activities at this time, said Hamerman, but probably for cultural events or lectures, perhaps by outside groups. “The acoustics are phenomenal,” he said. “I can’t wait for the day to hear our school choir sing in here.”

The former church’s attached school will become the SSA’s early childhood education centre, and the basement (under the sanctuary), which already has a stage and large kitchen, will become a theatre/music/arts area, and a second gym. Hamerman envisions meals for the schools being prepared in the kitchen.

The kindergarten is now housed on the main campus and the junior preschool and preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds are in nearby rented space that is directly across the street from the church.

It hasn’t been decided what the gracious house on Dufferin Road will be used for, perhaps offices.

Occupation of the new campus is scheduled for 2012-13. The congregation, Hamerman said, placed no conditions on the church’s sale.

SSA has 650 students, with 70-80 kids in preschool and 80-100 in kindergarten.

The present situation is “congested,” but enrolment is stable. “In Montreal, no one speaks about growth; what we hope for is to maintain enrolment, and with these enhanced facilities we should attract enough students to achieve that,” Hamerman said.



**Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter**