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Old Dutch Church in Kingston embraces change

Secular, sacred both honored

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The Rev. Renee House, the new leader of the Old Dutch Church in Kingston, has instituted some progressive changes to the historic house of worship.

KELLY MARSH/For the Times Herald-Record

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By James Nani

Times Herald-Record
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KINGSTON — Tiffany stained-glass windows. A letter from George Washington when he was a Revolutionary War general. A Renaissance Revival-style church with Greek, Italian and Egyptian influences.

Uptown Kingston's historic Old Dutch Church on Wall Street is a National Historic Landmark, holds an array of historic memorabilia and is a symbol for Kingston with its tall, thin steeple.

In short, it is a reminder of five centuries of Kingston's history.

But despite the church's deep ties with the old and traditional, its church leaders say they've actively embracing the new.

"In our spirit, we want to be 'the bold Dutch Church,'" said church elder Rob Sweeney.

So last week, when artists converged on Kingston for the popular O+ Festival, the Old Dutch Church stepped up to the plate.

From 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. last Saturday, the church hosted bands like Brooklyn-based Buke and Gase and producer/mixer Snowflake — in its sanctuary and right near the altar.

But having DJs and bands rock out late into the night wasn't a flip decision, said the church's new pastor, the Rev. Renee House.

It speaks to one of the church's core commitments, she said — that every square inch of everything, including the walls inside the church, belongs to God.

"We don't make that distinction between spiritual and material, secular and sacred," House said.

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Formally known as the First Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, it has also embraced the area's LGBTQ community.

They've even co-opted Kingston infamous Red Goat graffiti symbol into coffee mugs and T-shirts, calling supporters of their congregation "Red Sheep."

Nonetheless, where there is religion, there is tradition. And House admits the church's recent embraces have ruffled some feathers. She said a few staff members did leave because of recent changes, though the church has retained its congregation.

"Some people left because of these decisions," House said. "We decided not to invest the energy into those who don't see the vision."

For House, that openness was exactly what she was looking for when she came on from the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey six months ago as the church's first female pastor.

Its invitation to those in the LGBTQ community, which happened before she arrived, and doing things like bringing bands into its sanctuary have a theological precedent, she says.

"He (Jesus Christ) was not playing along with the power games of the political and religious center," House says.

Not bowing to the center is not something that some Christian institutions are known for. Even House's hometown church in Michigan — the church that baptized her— doesn't allow women to be pastors.

But at the Old Dutch Church, embracing the new is more than staying hip with the times. "God's people get in trouble when they think God's done speaking or acting in history," House said.

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