# Community divides over plan to turn Norwich URC church into cultural venue



In a swift display of community interest, a petition advocating for the conversion of the former United Reformed Church (URC) in Elm Hill, Norwich, has attracted 230 signatures in just four days. Spearheaded by Alma, an independent cultural arts venue, the initiative aims to transform the Grade II-listed building into a space for shared creativity and storytelling, as articulated by Leticia Thope, the leader of the project. The proposed development follows the church's closure in October 2020 and seeks to reestablish the site as "a modern-day assembly space."

Alma's vision includes hosting spoken word nights, poetry circles, and jazz performances, contributing to a cultural renaissance in the area. However, the proposal is not without controversy. Local sentiments are sharply divided, with many expressing staunch opposition to the church's transformation into an entertainment venue. According to the Norwich City Council's Planning Portal, 103 comments have been logged concerning the plans, 93 of which are objections. Detractors argue that alterations such as placing bars in front of stained glass windows and modifying the interior would compromise the historical significance of the structure. One objector articulated concern that such changes would "ruin everything that makes this church special," highlighting the delicate balance between modern use and heritage preservation.

The debate surrounding the Elm Hill URC mirrors challenges faced by similar institutions across the UK. Recent examples demonstrate a growing trend of church closures, particularly in affluent areas, raising questions about the future of these cultural landmarks. For instance, another URC in Bath is reportedly set to be repurposed as a community space, potentially as a theatre or museum, amid efforts to reinvest proceeds into other congregations struggling with declining numbers. The factors contributing to such closures include shrinking congregations—one in Sittingbourne saw its membership dwindle to just ten—and significant maintenance costs, making ongoing operation unsustainable for many local churches.

The complex discussion around the URC in Elm Hill also reflects broader trends within the URC itself, where there is a notable disparity between closures in affluent and low-income areas. As highlighted in a recent report by Church Action on Poverty, the URC is urged to reinvest in poorer communities to foster growth and sustain congregations. This ongoing dialogue underscores the significance of preserving heritage while adapting to contemporary needs, as communities strive to navigate the evolving social landscape.

As the planning decision looms, due by June 30, discussions surrounding the potential transformation of the Elm Hill URC emphasise the intricate relationship between history, community sentiment, and the need for cultural spaces. Whether the plans for Alma will gain the necessary support to come to fruition remains to be seen, but what is clear is the passion of residents both for and against the proposals, demonstrating the church's continued relevance in local discourse.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25206744.petition-alma-convert-former-urc-church-elm-hill/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sittingbourne/news/church-closes-after-congregation-shrinks-44826/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25206744.petition-alma-convert-former-urc-church-elm-hill/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-somerset-67136653), [[5]](https://eastboldonforum.org.uk/2021/11/12/united-reform-church-hall/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://urc.org.uk/urc-bucks-church-closures-in-poorer-areas-trend/), [[4]](https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sittingbourne/news/church-closes-after-congregation-shrinks-44826/), [[6]](https://www.advertiserandtimes.co.uk/news/walkford-church-closes-after-congregation-falls-to-12-9250671/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25206744.petition-alma-convert-former-urc-church-elm-hill/?ref=rss), [[3]](https://urc.org.uk/urc-bucks-church-closures-in-poorer-areas-trend/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25206744.petition-alma-convert-former-urc-church-elm-hill/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sittingbourne/news/church-closes-after-congregation-shrinks-44826/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25206744.petition-alma-convert-former-urc-church-elm-hill/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-somerset-67136653> - The United Reformed Church in Argyle Street, Bath, has been closed since 2020. Developers plan to renovate the building for community use, potentially as a museum, art gallery, theatre, or concert hall. The church, established in 1790, is near Bath's historic Pulteney Bridge. The sale proceeds will support other URC congregations in Bath.
3. <https://urc.org.uk/urc-bucks-church-closures-in-poorer-areas-trend/> - A report by Church Action on Poverty reveals that the United Reformed Church (URC) has more closures in affluent areas than in low-income ones, contrasting with other denominations that have closures in deprived areas. The URC is urged to reinvest in low-income communities to support their growth and development.
4. <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/sittingbourne/news/church-closes-after-congregation-shrinks-44826/> - The United Reformed Church in Sittingbourne closed due to a dwindling congregation, which had reduced to just 10 members. The church, built in the 1860s, had been without a full-time minister for over a decade. The congregation's decline led to the difficult decision to close the church.
5. <https://eastboldonforum.org.uk/2021/11/12/united-reform-church-hall/> - In July 2021, the United Reformed Church and Hall in East Boldon faced closure due to significant roof repair costs. The East Boldon Neighbourhood Forum sought to have the hall registered as an Asset of Community Value to protect it from development and allow the community time to purchase it. However, the church building itself could not be registered as an ACV.
6. <https://www.advertiserandtimes.co.uk/news/walkford-church-closes-after-congregation-falls-to-12-9250671/> - Walkford United Reformed Church closed after nearly 200 years due to a dwindling congregation, which had reduced to only a dozen members. The decision was made by the local membership, and a special service was held to celebrate the church's life before its closure.
7. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ell-r-brown/5981418007/> - A photograph of the United Reformed Church on Princes Street in Norwich, located along Elm Hill. The church is Grade II listed and was built in 1869. The image provides a visual representation of the church's architecture and its position in the historic area of Norwich.