Cooperation, preservation win out

A major shortcoming in American culture is our overwhelming penchant for the new.

Going back a century or more, Americans have always preferred new buildings and new developments rather than the preservation of what we already have.

We've seen this in the demolition of some of Pottstown's finest buildings, and in the post-war emigration of Pottstown's middle class to the newly built suburbs in the Pottsgroves and the Coventries.

It is particularly gratifying, therefore, to see Bethel Community Church resist this trend by purchasing the 1962 Hesed Shel Emet synagogue on North Keim Street for $700,000.

Making the most of the facility, Bethel Church will now rent space to the Hesed Shel Elmet congregation, whose membership has been declining in recent years and can no longer support such a large building.

Bethel AME Church, at Beech and Franklin streets, has been growing by leaps and bounds in recent years and was outgrowing its space. It originally planned to build a new building at Lincoln Avenue and Grant street. The soil proved unstable and Bethel was forced to look elsewhere.

A year ago, Bethel's longtime pastor, the Rev. Vernon Ross Jr., resigned to form a new church called Bethel Community Church. The new congregation availed itself of an offer from Congregation Hesed Shel Emet to share its building, which eventually led to last month's property transfer.

The new Bethel congregation now has a much finer building than it could have afforded to build new, on an 8-acre lot with ample parking in the rear.

The original Bethel AME congregation remains in its historic church building on Beech Street.

The community benefits from the preservation of two lovely buildings which have been mainstays of their neighborhoods for decades.

From an environmental standpoint, it is usually much better to preserve than build new. No demolition materials will need to be landfilled, and no new raw materials will be needed for construction.

The taxpayer wins: Avoiding the construction of a new church means no new tax-exempt property.

And the community gains a non-denominational church and synagogue cooperating under one roof.

Bethel Community Church has purchased the former synagogue of Congregation Hesed Shel Emet (Mercy and Truth), built in 1962 on North Keim Street. The synagogue congregation will continue to use part of the building as a tenant.