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SOLUTIONS FOR SACRED PLACES: 3rd Annual Places of Faith Roundtable

Thursday, Sept 30, 2010 Cochrane Street United Church,
81 Cochrane Street, St. John's, Newfoundland

Organized by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL)
in collaboration with the Heritage Canada Foundation (HCF)
A Project of the Canadian Forum for Public Research on Heritage (CFPRH)

Executive Summary

What are the issues? Places of worship are being sold because dwindling congregations cannot afford the maintenance costs associated with these typically large and complex structures. These buildings are often landmarks with strong associations with the public history of the community and a type of public ownership due to donation and tax status.

Research: We need to get ahead of the issues by developing a better understanding of what the resources are. Hiring interns as researchers helps gain knowledge and to draw young people into this issue. Web-based inventories are useful to capture and communicate knowledge.

Protection: Most places of worship are not formally protected by heritage legislation, and designation as national historic sites offers no protection. It is often the land, not the building that is valuable; if a church is protected, it is worth less economically. Many Christian faith groups oppose places of worship being covered by heritage legislation.

Strategies for Congregations: Churches must redefine themselves as the needs of the congregation change. Churches need to make the case of their value by telling stories that the wider community can get interested in. Churches must develop new partnerships in the community, identify their assets, and connect them in new ways. The sharing of facilities between denominations is becoming increasingly common.

Loss of Heritage Character: When buildings are converted, elements of the church are lost. You will always lose some heritage value when the church loses its pews, the space is divided and bells removed.

Best-Practices: The best-case scenario is for a place of worship to remain as such. Sometimes it is necessary for churches to establish a different corporate structure in order to obtain funding not normally available to churches. Effective adaptive reuse models include libraries, where the pews are replaced with bookshelves.

There are also community centers, theaters, museums, galleries, concert halls, sports facilities, and soup kitchens. Municipally owned sites and non-profit projects developed with good expertise have had incredible impacts for community and culture.

Planning Issues: The slow planning process to convert a church can create obstacles for great development projects.

Private Conversions: Commercial conversions can be very successful adaptive reuse projects, but long-term stability is an issue. There is often harsh public criticism because it is seen as privatization of a public asset. In residential conversion, property owners are unwilling or reluctant to pay for extensive repairs. New residents to a former place of worship may be uncomfortable with maintaining the religious iconography.

Fundraising: It is often difficult to find external funding to restore a church, but it is possible to get money for community projects. Capital campaigns and planned giving are important elements of fundraising. Demonstrating to the community the financial value of the contributions that a congregation makes to a community is often a very successful strategy because it demonstrates to the community that they have a stake in keeping these buildings in good repair.

Appropriate Use: Churches must be ready to establish guidelines for what is appropriate for adaptive reuse. Some feel that once a property has left the religious realm, it is free game unless there is a covenant on that property, while others feel that conversion to pubs and dance clubs is inappropriate. In small communities, residential conversion may be the only option.

Introductory Remarks:

Natalie Bull and George Chalker

Summary: In this decade we have faced rapidly increasing challenges to historic places of faith. Buildings are being sold due to dwindling congregations who are unable to afford the maintenance costs associated with these often large and complex structures. These cases are made even more complex by the fact that the buildings are often landmarks in their communities. This symposium will share success stories and identify strategies and models that faith communities, congregations, heritage advocates, and other stakeholders can use to help keep these historic places of faith alive in various forms. The day is structured around the idea of a *continuum of use*. As we move along the continuum of use there are different sets of challenges and dilemmas. Some of them are ethical, some of them are moral, and some of them technical.

Session 1:

Sarah Peveler “New Dollars/New Partners for Sacred Places”

Summary: Case studies include “How Shifting a Mindset can Shift a Congregation’s Future,” “New Dollars, New Partners: A Success Story,” a newsletter from the Rehoboth Church Preservation Society, and “Revival at Calvary”. Partners for Sacred Places serves congregations to address the fates of churches and help congregations reinvent themselves. Rural and urban churches alike are confronted with the need to maintain integrity. They offer training to help communities tell new stories, develop new partnerships in the community, identify their assets, and raise money externally. It helps churches restructure to attract funding that would not normally go to a church, but could go to a non-profit.

Partners to Sacred Places assist congregations to determine the economic value of the services that they provide to the community. This helps make the case for public investment. Congregations should be able to describe who they are as a congregation, what they have, what their building looks like, what shape it is in, and what their priorities are. They urge congregations to establish capital campaigns and planned giving. Congregations should reevaluate their special events to identify their market and how to set economic goals.

Places of faith are critical landmarks for us; they mark place, they mark memory, and they mark ministry. That is why they were built, and that is why they continue. Stories bring these buildings to life, placing the building in its larger context—otherwise they are just bricks and mortar rather than living breathing embodiments of what people know and believe in. Partners for Sacred Places want congregations to look at larger themes and to put together a timeline for their community, their congregation, and their building so that it all fits together.

Session 2:

Luc Noppen and Lyne Bernier “New Uses That Serve the Community: Successes, Challenges”

Summary: There are many successful and many unsuccessful adaptive reuse projects in Quebec. Luc Noppen and Lyne Bernier work at the Université du Québec à Montréal for the public on behalf of heritage and work on churches, even if they are no longer churches. Questions addressed include how do you buy a church, what price to pay, what clauses should be included in the terms of sale, how to finance the project, how to develop a not-for-profit organization, and navigating municipal tax laws.

In 2003 the Conseil du patrimoine religieux was established by the Quebec Government to administer funding for Church restoration. The Quebec Government invests \$5 million each year.

Some preliminary research findings are that private projects are failures, or are heading towards failure. Quebec is working toward creating a program to prevent the demolition of places of faith. Another key finding is that not-for-profit projects developed with good expertise have had incredible impacts for community and culture.

A lot of the earliest conversions occurred following the 1925 establishment of the United Church of Canada. Now, some of the major, central Montreal churches are closing. An important, potential new use for these churches is residential use, private and low cost housing. In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to find new uses

for places of faith. Twenty percent of churches that are closed are being demolished, sometimes because a developer buys the church for the high property value and then demolishes the church.

We do not quickly accept that a former church becomes a bar or dance club. Quebec culture comes from religious culture. Private projects usually face harsh public criticism because it is seen as an extreme form of privatization of a collective good, of collective property. Regardless of denomination we call them *our* churches and the municipalities often refuse to change zoning from institutional to residential.

A significant problem is groups offering to pay high prices for the churches but only paying the down payment. The only ones who pay high prices for the churches are the municipalities because the municipality sets the value of the land. Large non-profit organizations also pay quite a lot for places of faith. Otherwise, churches are often sold for \$1 because, when we purchase a church, we purchase a debt. No bank will give a mortgage on a church and, if the church is protected, it is less valuable because it is the land that is valuable not the building. Commercial conversions face difficulties achieving economic equilibrium. There are cases where the developers have been unable to sell the residential units and eventually walk away from an incomplete failed project saying “never again.” Developers are facing lawsuits because of significant extra costs incurred to residents and contractors. It is becoming common knowledge that while a church as residence may look attractive, it is a nightmare economically. Taxation is also a major problem for conversion. Previously tax-exempt properties could easily cost \$200 000 per year, in addition to the costs of heating and repairs of around \$150 000. Failed development projects often end in demolition at the public expense.

Residential conversions are problematic because non-Christians may not want to live with the iconography. You will always lose some heritage value in the conversion—when the church loses its benches and the space is divided, when we remove the bells, create underground parking. The most difficult churches are yet to come. Notre Dame in Montreal, the Basillique du Québec. Five of some of the most historic churches in Quebec are already facing closure.

Models that have proven effective are community centers, theaters, museums, galleries, and concert halls. Sports facilities are also common. We have had successful examples of libraries as early as the 1980s. Community centers have proven to be successful adaptive reuse projects. Soup kitchens are another common conversion.

Linda Bowden: A Short History of Cochrane Street United Church

Summary: The Cochrane Street Church looks very unassuming, tucked away in a residential area. The footprint is a Greek cross design. The interior design is Byzantine, with barrel vaults and a wonderful dome. The acoustics are particularly fine, especially for choral music. There is a ramped floor and a circular auditorium with each pew particularly designed for the space. Some other things of particular interest are the stained glass windows designed in Canada by English artisans working for the Luxfer Prism Company of Toronto using English glass. The organ is the fourth to serve to the congregation. It was installed in 1957 and was designed and built by Casavant Frères of St-Hyacinthe, Quebec. It is the largest single pipe organ in Newfoundland. Everything is original in the space except for the lower windows, which were replaced some years ago by those similar to the original design.

Session 3:

Richard Moorhouse “Commercial and Private Sector Conversions: Successes, Issues”

Abstract: The Ontario Heritage Trust is the province’s lead heritage agency reporting to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture in Ontario and mandated under the *Ontario Heritage Act*. We hold 175 properties including one church property in trust, and hold about forty easements on church properties in Ontario.

A few years ago we realized we needed to research places of worship in our province to determine how many sites there were, and what they were like. We needed to develop a better understanding of the resources. In 2005, the Ontario Government updated the *Heritage Act*, making it binding legislation. Several Christian faith groups lobbied the government to prevent places of worship from being covered by the legislation. The Minister of Culture provided us with \$1 million which allowed us to hire young people to research the sites. We could gain a lot of knowledge and also draw young people into this issue.

The inventory we developed is web enabled, searchable, interactive, and fully bilingual. The users come from the faith community, are researchers, real estate agents, visitors to Ontario, and the general public. We have a lot of background information. We have 5,000 properties posted now and will probably be posting 8,800 by the time we finish. Out of the 5,500 sites, only 400 places of worship are protected through municipal designation.

Places of faith are being threatened by closure and deferred maintenance. Development pressures face places of worship in the larger urban areas. Some of the concerns we hear is that the land is more valuable vacant. Demolition of heritage churches is not uncommon, particularly when abandoned churches are deemed structurally unsound. They are often demolished with no indication of recycling or sustainability—it is just going to landfill.

The sharing of facilities between denominations is becoming increasingly common. However some would rather see churches demolished than taken on by another faith or for commercial purposes. Faith-to-faith conversion is also fairly common and can be quite successful, but many faith groups are not interested in converting an existing building and are constructing new.

Adaptive reuse has been happening for centuries—a building becomes available and is converted to a museum or library, a very easy conversion and quite acceptable. We prefer the projects that are minimal intrusions into buildings with a reversible approach. Those converted to institutional use are generally better protected because a municipality owns them. In central locations, places of worship are landmark buildings in central parts of town that require site-specific solutions.

Commercial conversions are common and often the place of worship often becomes part of the branding, the logo of the company. Some of the larger churches in Toronto were, by the 1950s and 1960s, already becoming a venue for concerts and performances. Bed and Breakfasts are growing in popularity and there are examples where new owners created quite a nice space without major alterations. We have many successful examples of conversions to restaurants. Pubs pose more questionable uses for churches. There are condominium developments in large churches and, while that cannot happen everywhere, it is a model in Toronto that is working. Several small chapels and churches have been converted for yoga and meditation. These are easy conversions, but may not be sustainable economically.

Session 4: Panel Presentations: Learning from Newfoundland Case Studies

Sandy Gibbons, Gibbons Snow Architects Inc

Summary: St. Joseph's Church is in the east end of St. John's, at the foot of Signal Hill. Sandy Gibbons is an architect and small business owner who converted the building into office condominiums. It was a new thing when they did it in Newfoundland, though there had been some smaller projects. The application to the City of St. John's took about a year and a half to get approvals, a process that took too long.

The building was built in 1954 so a lot of the technology had to be improved. The building looked great from a building envelope perspective, but there were problems with insulation, leaks, and lack of controls. The church, abandoned for four years, had been gutted; there were only a couple of pews in the choir loft.

The site actually had two components to it. One component, which we purchased, was the church building and the priest house. There was another component of the site that actually had three schools on it. I also had the option to purchase it but we eventually dropped our option on the property. Another company, Nolan Hall, purchased it and created a boutique hotel and built brownstone houses. These projects caused a lot of controversy, but also cleaned up land that had lost its use.

Nicky Hawkins and Andy Perlis, Pagoda Projects

Summary: Nicky Hawkin's and Andy Perlis's church is in Admiral's Cove, an area south of St. John's, near Cape Royal. Built in 1954, it was abandoned and had been for sale for about a year before they bought it. The foundation was rotten, the floor needed to be raised, and they built a loft and replaced the dome. Nicky, a stained glass artist, did the stained glass on the loft that leads into the tower. The bottom windows came from a church in Springdale, Newfoundland. A lot of the materials were recycled.

There is a pagoda with a guest room on the top floor, and it is the signature building of their non-profit, the Pagoda Project. It is an international religious theme. The pagoda is looking down through the garden out into the bay. They also grow flowers and their vegetables for the year in the garden.

Linda Bowden, Stewardship Committee, Cochrane Street United Church

Summary. Cochrane Street United faces many challenges, but wants to continue. Revenue comes from member donations and fundraising; they are fortunate the congregation has remained stable over the past numbers of years. They recognize, however, that they cannot expect members to pay for ongoing costs and the restoration of the building. Like many other churches, deferred maintenance has been the operational approach.

Cochrane Street has faced difficulties raising external money. Grants are not available to repair a church building, but it may be found to restore a community building. What use can this space have to the community? Marketing for us is a particular challenge because historically, that is not something that a church does. We are searching for a new minister and it has been suggested that the new minister would help market the space and become more visible in the community. For some years now, this sanctuary has been used to raise money, increasingly for rentals. The marvelous space seats about seven 700. They have the largest single pipe organ in Newfoundland, as well as a grand piano and fine acoustics. They also have support space and hardworking volunteers.

The Church must make decisions about what things they can permit in the space. What makes a space such as the sanctuary sacred? And under what circumstances could it be used for secular activities? At what point is it not appropriate? Who makes that decision? Churches must be ready to answer that, and to defend the decision. If this space becomes space for community, does that then become real church work? The mission statement of Cochrane Street states that they are to use the physical resources that have been given to further the mission of the church and are to carefully maintain these resources. It is important that the building is brought up to standards so it can be used for a number of years without penalizing the next generation.

Our places of worship are part of our landscapes, they are part of our culture. They were the first buildings that were built when communities were developed. The opportunity to make use of buildings as community resources is there, it is just trying to find the right fit.

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