

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Vancouver, showing a mix of urban architecture. A large, historic stone cathedral with a green roof is the central focus. Surrounding it are modern high-rise buildings, including a prominent glass skyscraper. The city is interspersed with trees showing autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The overall scene is bathed in the warm light of late afternoon or early morning.

Sacred Spaces Civic Value

Making the Case for the Future of Faith-Built Assets

April 2025



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Our mission is to support vibrant, equitable, livable and resilient cities in Canada through research, engagement and storytelling.

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Land Acknowledgement

The head office of the Canadian Urban Institute is located in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples from across Turtle Island. Tkaronto is covered by Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaty, signed with multiple Anishinaabe Nations.

This place continues to be home to many Indigenous Peoples from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on this land.

CUI is cognizant that many urban planning practices reinforce racist and exclusionary practices of colonialism. Considering our primary focus on adapting Christian-affiliated properties, we acknowledge the living history of cultural genocide imposed on Indigenous Peoples through religious, cultural, and linguistic conversion by Christian institutions with the support of the Canadian government. The legacies of these colonial experiments, including residential schools, persist to this day and continue to influence negative outcomes for Indigenous Peoples – economically, socially, and spiritually.

The work of city building today must include confronting the legacies of the past and searching for new approaches that centre around equity and inclusion, making cities for and with everyone.

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The Church is the Church only
when it exists for others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Why Faith Spaces Matter to Main Streets and Downtowns

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) has been tracking its impacts on urban and community life, civic services, institutions, and organizations, and looking at how pre-existing challenges and trends have evolved. Our work zeroed in quickly on the key organizing units found in cities and towns at all scales: the downtowns and main streets where an array of civic assets, economic activity, and people intersect, together creating communities of interaction, exchange, and mutual aid.

Central to main streets are the anchor “third spaces” that play an integral role in building social capital – historically, libraries and places of worship. Regardless of affiliation, the spaces that faith built have historically provided a broad range of programs and activities of a non-religious nature, of service to the broader community.



Notre-Dame-des-Victoires Church, Quebec City, QC

image credit: Aravindh.com



Mordecai Richler Library, Montreal, QC

Communities of all sizes have benefited from the array of sacred and secular activities and services. Borne of necessity and convenience, these spaces are used for multiple purposes, including worship, but also to meet wider community needs for social services and support, culture and the arts, and more. Congregations have generally been happy to provide their facilities for worthy purposes, as part of their larger mission and a way to defray their operating costs.

These third spaces, essential for the social, cultural, and civic functioning of communities across Canada, are at risk because aging faith buildings are falling into disrepair, congregational membership and donations are on the decline, and faith property owners lack the expertise and resources needed to adapt. The loss of faith buildings is a problem for everyone.

A 2019 study by National Trust for Canada found that one-third of Canada's 27,000 faith buildings – largely Christian – will likely close permanently in this decade¹. The United Church of Canada alone has seen its congregations closing at a rate of more than one a week². Many of these buildings are of historical significance and in cities and communities of all sizes – from Toronto (pop. 2.8 million) to Seldom on Fogo Island (pop. 2,250) – and have significant building footprints within their communities.

In comparison, there are approximately 120 active synagogues in Canada, and a smaller number of active mosques and temples. Non-Christian faith groups appear not to be experiencing the same overall decline in attendance as traditional Christian churches. For this reason, the scope of this report does not extend to non-Christian properties, buildings, and infrastructure.

Struggling with declining member dues and the ever increasing financial challenges posed by aging buildings, stewards of properties initially built by Christian faith communities are facing increasing pressures to respond to the complex social challenges of their neighbourhoods. What plans for repurposing their assets are financially viable, to be able to recognize their legacy and continue to be of value to current and future communities? What obligations do religious institutions have to the broader public good, having benefited from decades of tax exemptions? With real estate development pressures intensifying – making these already-struggling places prime targets for redevelopment – how can their civic and community value be secured? And how can municipal planners quantify and plan for the loss of civic spaces that faith buildings have provided for decades?

Technology writer Adam Greenfield highlights this challenge:

“

...church buildings often support institutions that are vital to the well-being of the local community — to see the truth of this, one only needs to note how many of the community-based mutual aid efforts we so often turn to now in times of crisis, to fill in the gaps of state and private provision that otherwise leave us cruelly exposed to turns of fortune, happen to be co-located with a church, mosque or gurdwara....³

He suggests that local communities should:

...assume control over underutilized churches, and convert them to ‘Lifehouses’....



“

The fundamental idea of the Lifehouse is that there should be a place in every three-to-four city block radius where you can charge your phone when the power's down everywhere else, draw drinking water when the supply from the mains is for whatever reason untrustworthy, gather with your neighbors to discuss and deliberate over matters of common concern, organize reliable childcare, borrow tools it doesn't make sense for any one household to own individually, and so on — and that these can and should be one and the same place.

These places that faith-based organizations initially built for worship have the potential to become well resourced and broadly used “resilience centres.” Climate change will only make the need for this kind of responsive, communal space more acute.



Church of the Ascension, Echo Drive, Ottawa, ON

If left underutilized, abandoned, or even demolished, the loss of these spaces will present a significant threat to the social fabric of communities at every scale.

Smaller communities often have two or three vacant or near-vacant faith buildings along their main streets, and urban environments similarly may have once had sufficiently differentiated congregations to support buildings in every neighbourhood for every Christian denomination, but that is now rarely the case.

Churches are also, in many cases, important community landmarks, essential to community identity and wayfinding (“Just turn left at St. Marks....”).

When places of worship are threatened with closure and even demolition, invariably the greatest outcry comes from neighbours with no religious affiliation whatsoever, but who are nonetheless dismayed to lose a site they see as crucial to neighbourhood identity.

There is a potentially positive confluence of circumstances: with community and cultural organizations and service providers all in search of affordable places and spaces for their activities, and faith communities facing their own dwindling futures, there is opportunity for new partnerships, financial models, and civic purpose.

However, as we found in preparing this report, unraveling the Gordian knot of future stewardship of faith-built and owned assets is not for the faint of heart.

As with so many urban challenges, ownership of any problem is shared across sectors and jurisdictions, and finding courageous first-movers to try new approaches and inform useful models is difficult. As federal, provincial, and local governments establish investment priorities for community strengthening, there is a prime opportunity to demonstrate the critical role that these civic assets play.

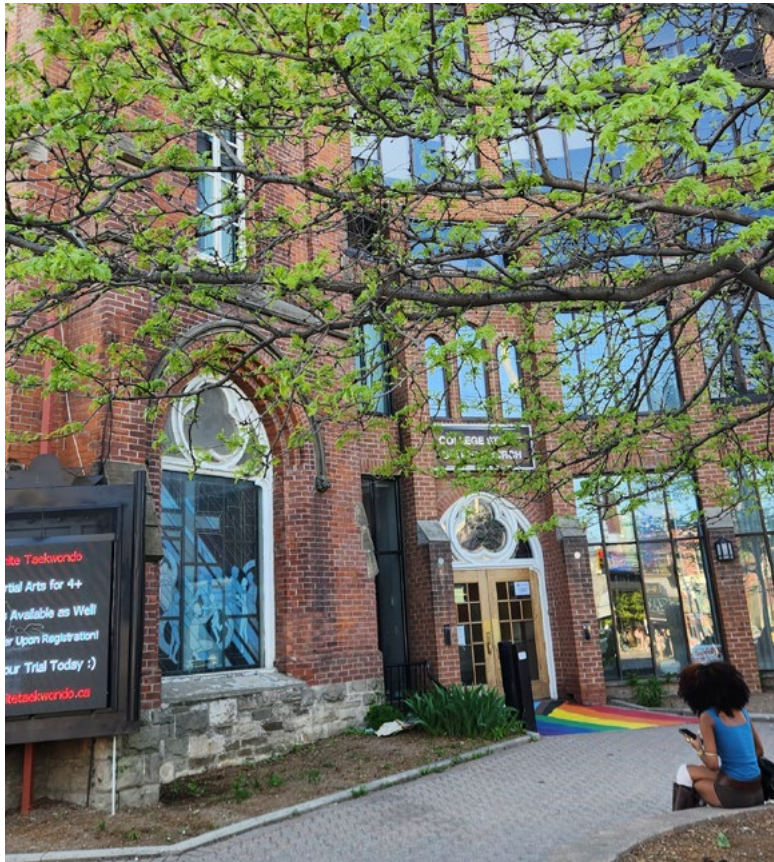
This work confirms there is no one right way to repurpose Canada's faith-built assets. In communities throughout the country, we need varied strategies that empower the stewards to work with the communities in which they are located to find solutions that support community needs. This moment presents an unprecedented opportunity for Canada to invest in these essential civic and community assets – faith-built assets – as a form of resilience infrastructure. Together, these assets form

an extensive network that support place-based physical and social resilience.

We present the challenge and provide a series of examples of what is possible to reinvigorate these spaces for civic use and community benefit, building on their heritage and historic role in communities, with sustainable investment arrangements and shared governance approaches that will work for current and future uses, whatever those may be. It proposes a series of actions not only for the denominations and congregations, but also by municipal planning staff and policymakers at all three orders of government to make the case for change.

The time for finger pointing and blame has passed. We need to move forward with concerted actions that leverage the strategic importance of these civic assets. Although their faith-based constituency may be dispersing,

their spatial community remains. Faith-based organizations need to rise to meet the present and future of the people and places they were originally built to serve. They cannot do this alone, which this report makes clear.



College St. United Church, Toronto ON

The prophetic future of every community – no matter the size, location, or composition – is one of resilience and opportunity. Local economies, and the communities they emanate from and support, are built on buildings, properties, and infrastructure, including faith-built assets that have been figuratively, and literally, their cornerstone. We cannot squander this heritage – both sacred and civic, the product of decades of financial commitment from the faithful and tax abatements from the public – and must evolve productively and creatively with it. This is the case for the future of spaces faith built: to honour sacred spaces and generate civic value for the communities that house them.

Mary W Rowe
President & CEO
Canadian Urban Institute

INTRODUCTION





Nonprofits and charities depend on churches for affordable space. If we do nothing, the real estate market will turn them into condos. The real question is: how can we better understand community needs, and use their social impact to build new structures for change.

The Reverend Graham Singh, CEO, Relèven, Montréal, Quebec



Between 2009 and 2018,
4,300 Christian churches closed
across Canada,⁴ representing a shift
in over \$15 billion in land value,⁵
at an average of nearly \$3.5 million⁶
in value per property.

In 2019, National Trust for Canada warned that another 9,000 religious spaces would be lost over the next decade.⁶



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The background image shows the interior of a large, ornate church. The ceiling is high and features intricate architectural details, including a large, circular fresco in the center. A large, multi-tiered chandelier hangs from the ceiling, casting a warm glow. The pews are made of light-colored wood and are arranged in rows. Several people are visible, some sitting in the pews and others standing. The overall atmosphere is solemn and historic.

The rate of people who attended group religious activities at least once a month have nearly halved from 43% in 1985 down to 23% in 2019.⁷

COMMUNITY

Younger generations are less likely than older generations to declare having a religious affiliation and to participate in religious activities.

Table 1: Generational decline in Canadian religiosity (Cornelissen, 2021) ⁸

Generation	Declared having a religious affiliation	Attended group religious activities
Born between 1940 and 1959	85%	61%
Born between 1980 and 1990	27%	18%

image credit: William White

Why Place – and Places of Faith – Matter to the Future of Canadian Communities

Building on CUI's initiatives at the intersection of pandemic recovery, downtown and main street revitalization, and civic infrastructure investment, the purpose of this work is to understand the opportunities that underutilized properties owned by faith-based organizations present for improving the resiliency of communities, and what we risk without intervention. The adaptation of faith properties, buildings, and spaces – “faith-built assets” – currently in use and at risk of closure, offers a way to preserve “third spaces” and the community services housed within them, while renewing their purpose in the face of declining religiosity, changing demographics, and ongoing challenges faced by cities and towns.



Church of Sainte-Anne-de-la-Rochelle, QC

image credit: Entremise



The diversity of communities across the country necessitates thinking beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

Therefore, this report looks at the diversity of uses and adaptations of faith spaces to illustrate what is possible, what is needed to make such transitions possible, and to provide a sample of the types of reimagining faith spaces have undergone with many more examples in readers' own communities. To better align urban planning initiatives and respond to change in community needs and desires, place-based approaches and diverse investments that consider historical and social contexts are necessary. Faith-built assets can be leveraged to provide parts of solutions and find relevancy in contemporary times.

CUI's research highlights trends in Canadian religiosity – mainly the declining use of Christian-affiliated faith buildings – that pose a risk to the maintenance and longevity of these assets. These are buildings often found at the centre of communities, whether in urban neighbourhoods or small towns. An analysis of three case study examples in Canada and two in the United States highlights potential pathways forward for those concerned about the future of faith properties in their communities and neighbourhoods across the country. These examples are multi-dimensional (offering many different types of uses) and multi-sectoral, encouraging collaborative initiatives to identify and implement future solutions.

The approaches to adaptation are meant to inspire action. The places and spaces built by faith communities over centuries, in many cases, have provided programs and services critical to the healthy functioning of the communities where they are located. Although technically “owned” by local faith communities and/or their regional religious authorities (e.g. Christian denominations), decades of tax abatements confirm these assets are in fact jointly owned by the public, who should have a stake in their futures. Municipalities, communities, congregations, and denominations each face unique challenges posed by the opportunity – and responsibility – that these buildings present. We hope this report will aid us in finding tailored solutions that prevent the loss communities will face if faith buildings shutter en masse.

The relevance of “place” to faith-based assets

The concept of “place” is seen as an integral part of urban development that connects people, communities, and their environments. A “place-based” approach is one that fosters economic, environmental, and social vitality by leveraging existing spaces, buildings, and communities’ networks to create new opportunities. Place-based approaches prioritize the involvement of local communities and the promotion of inclusive, sustainable urbanism to encourage cross-sector collaboration between public, private, and community actors.

The adaptation of faith-built assets to suit a contemporary context is key to enabling our communities and neighbourhoods to evolve.

An aerial photograph of a city street. On the right side, there is a large, light-colored stone church with a prominent green copper roof and a tall steeple. The church is surrounded by green lawns and trees. To the left of the church, there are several multi-story buildings, some with red brick facades. A wide street runs horizontally across the middle of the image, with cars parked along the sides. The overall scene depicts a typical urban environment in a city.

**As with the population at large,
faith-based organizations are
concentrated on or near
main streets across Canada.**

Table 2: Religious Organizations on Main Street Canada-wide

Distance Threshold to Main Street	Count of Religious Organizations	% of Total Religious Organizations (17,476)
Within 50 metres	5,163	30%
Within 100 metres	6,726	38%
Within 250 metres	11,376	65%
Within 500 metres	14,626	84%

image credit: Conan Chee Productions

Faith Buildings as Anchors of Place


For almost three centuries, a hallmark of communities of all sizes was the church, built and operated by a religious charity. The historic composition of early settler communities across Canada was grounded in two additional settlement institutions: the post office and the school.



Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre, Ottawa ON

As Canada's population diversified, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other places of worship also became central to the identity of places, anchoring town centres, main streets, and neighbourhoods, and housing important social activities from voting stations to recreational floor hockey. And over recent decades, faith buildings have become sites for critical social supports such as food banks and out-of-the-cold shelters, as well as performance venues for cultural events and civic celebrations.

These faith-built assets continue to play an integral role in building social capital and connection, providing a broad range of programs and activities to religious and non-religious communities alike. In addition, faith buildings are important to communities because of their central locations and proximity to other civic assets.

An aerial photograph of a dense urban neighborhood, likely in a city like Toronto. The image shows a high concentration of multi-story brick buildings, many with flat roofs. Green trees are interspersed among the buildings. In the upper right quadrant, a large church with a prominent, tall, green-roofed steeple is visible. The church has a large circular window on its side. The overall scene depicts a typical inner-city residential or commercial area.

**85% of Canadians live within
one kilometre of a main street,
and 84% of faith-based organizations
are located within 500 metres
of a main street, with 30% located
on a main street.⁹**



image credit: Relèven

These faith buildings have served as anchors that many take for granted, and the continual trend of closures paint an uncertain future with significant consequences. Kendra Fry, *No Space for Community* project lead, speaks to the results of a 2019 survey on the reliance of non-profit groups on faith buildings:

“

The [No Space for Community] survey results have made it clear that faith buildings are host to a myriad of groups including a large number of daycares and arts groups who have their offices and performing spaces in faith buildings. These important not-for-profit and community groups cannot afford commercial spaces. If the faith buildings close, what will happen to these groups and the people they bring together? ¹⁰

Rick Reinhard, principal of Niagara Consulting and an advocate for church adaptation, summarizes how the loss of faith buildings will impact historic main streets in the U.S., providing a warning for similar Canadian communities:




Up to one-third of all houses of worship in the United States will have closed over the next few years. That's 100,000 churches, temples, mosques, and the like. Nowhere will these closures hit as hard as in America's historic and older Main Street districts. Think about it: many towns and cities began as settlements and were built around houses of worship. A town's historic main intersection often has faith institutions on two of the four corners.



St Matthew's Quebec City QC

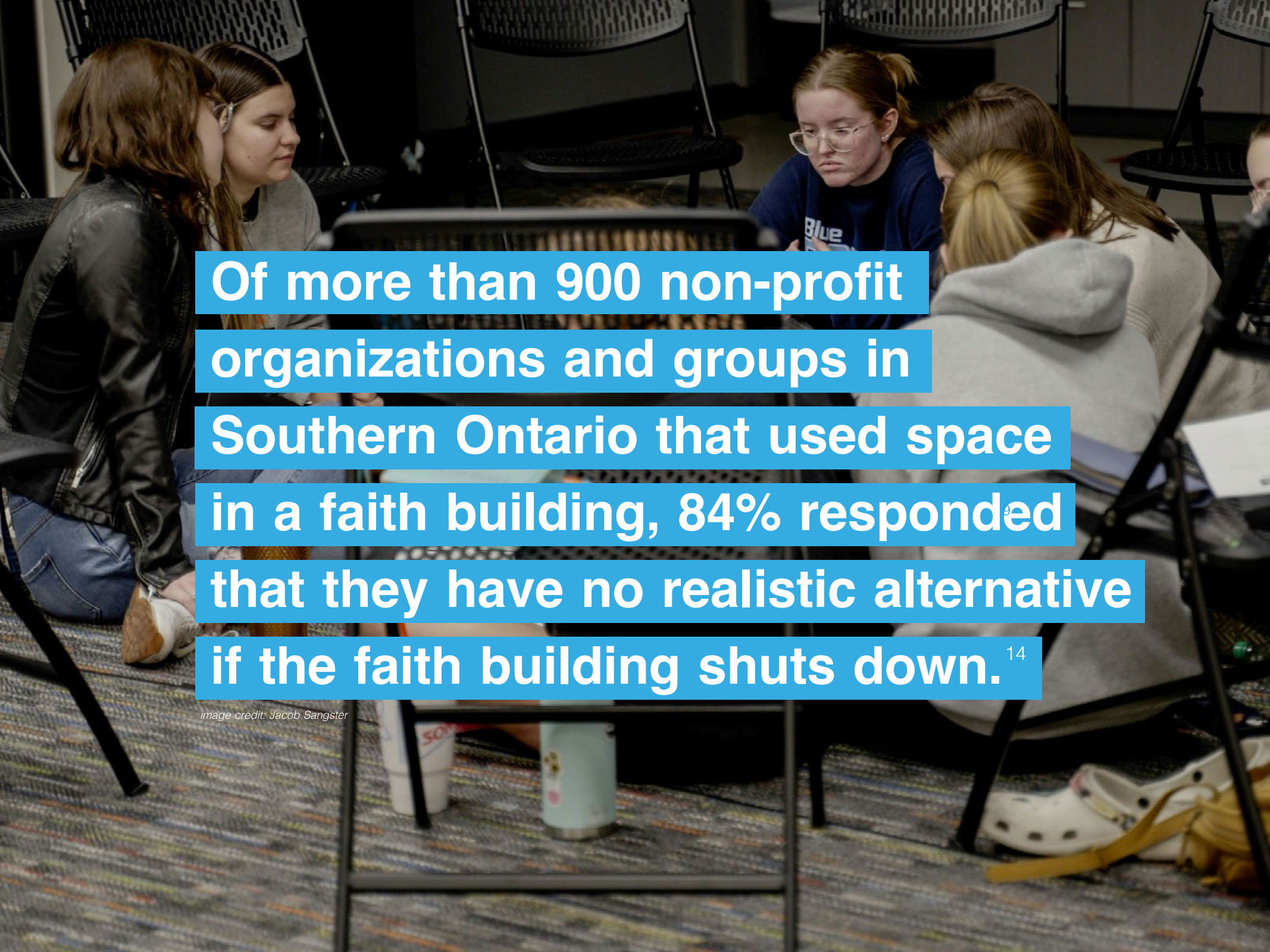
Residents and visitors recognize a city or a neighborhood by the steeples in its skyline. Religious institutions and their leaders often play an important role in civic life. The closure of religious houses creates headaches for Main Streets in rural and big cities alike, fundamentally changing the fabric of a downtown, whether it be through gaps between storefronts or increased density of office, residential, or retail units.¹¹



Massive waves of faith building closures will impact communities across Canada profoundly, as they provide convenient, affordable spaces for a wide range of community-based organizations.¹²



The average size of a faith building is just over 17,500 square feet,¹³ a significant building footprint in a neighbourhood.



Of more than 900 non-profit organizations and groups in Southern Ontario that used space in a faith building, 84% responded that they have no realistic alternative if the faith building shuts down.¹⁴

Image credit: Jacob Sangster

Trends in Canadian Religiosity

The decline of Canadian religiosity and church attendance explored by authors Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflame: ¹⁵

Social acceptance: It has become socially acceptable to identify as non-religious.

Reaction to religious conservatism and politics: The influence of religion on issues such as education, healthcare, women's rights, and social justice are viewed as counter to one's own beliefs.

Legacy of religious harm: Scandals related to residential schools, sexual abuse, and hypocrisy have led many to distance themselves from religious institutions.

Fear of religious extremism:

Fear of religious extremism can lead to unjustified actions toward certain individuals and communities.

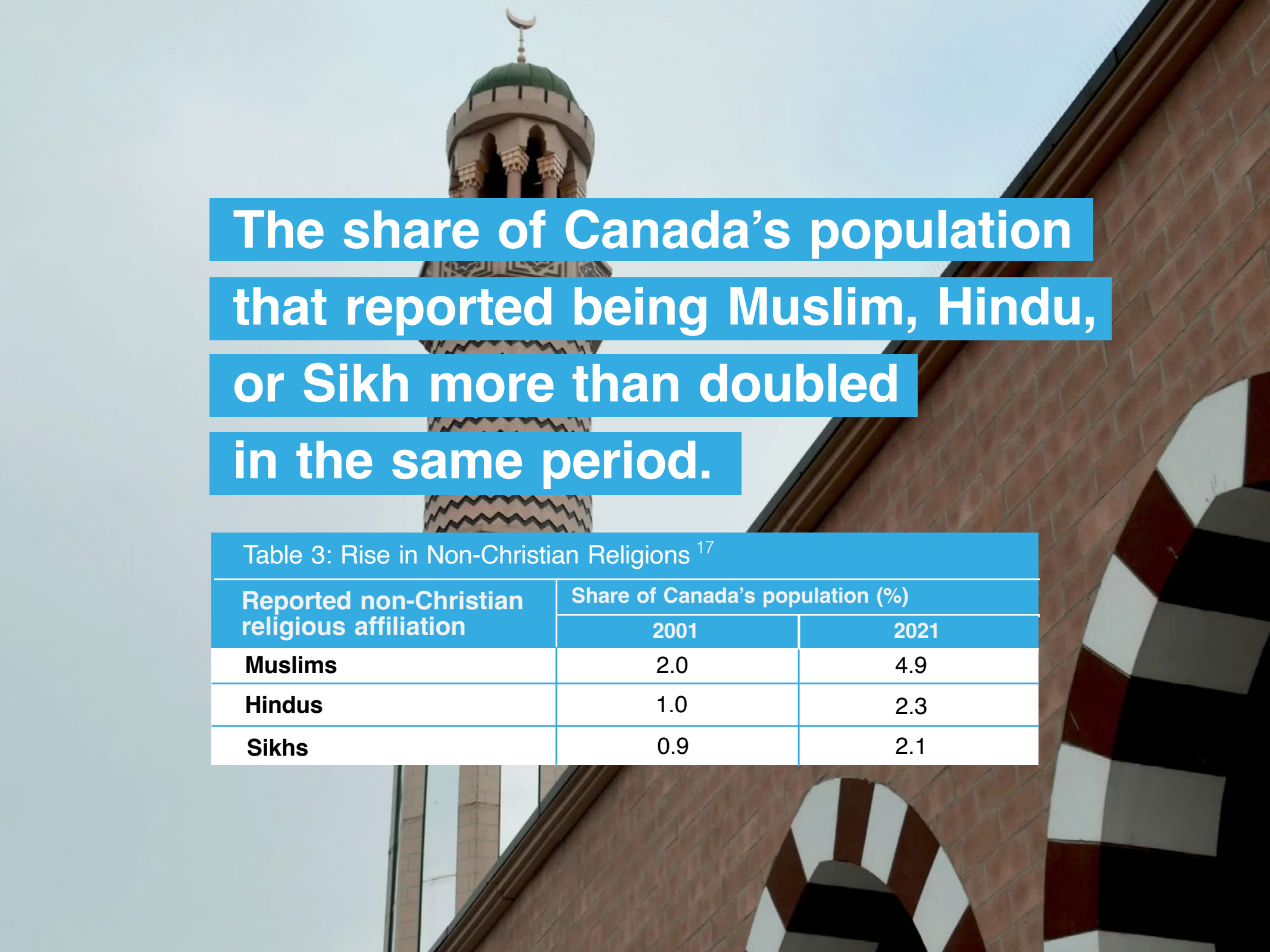
Identity as religious nones: Many "religious nones" are highly moral and socially engaged; they simply do not associate with organized religion.

Generational and cultural shifts: Children of non-religious parents grow up with no religious exposure, creating a generational shift away from religious affiliation.

Rise of "spiritual but not religious": Many Canadians still seek spirituality and community, but outside of traditional religious institutions.



Between 2001 and 2021, Canadians' affiliation with a Christian religion decreased by almost one-third, from 77% to 53%.¹⁶



The share of Canada's population that reported being Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh more than doubled in the same period.

Table 3: Rise in Non-Christian Religions ¹⁷

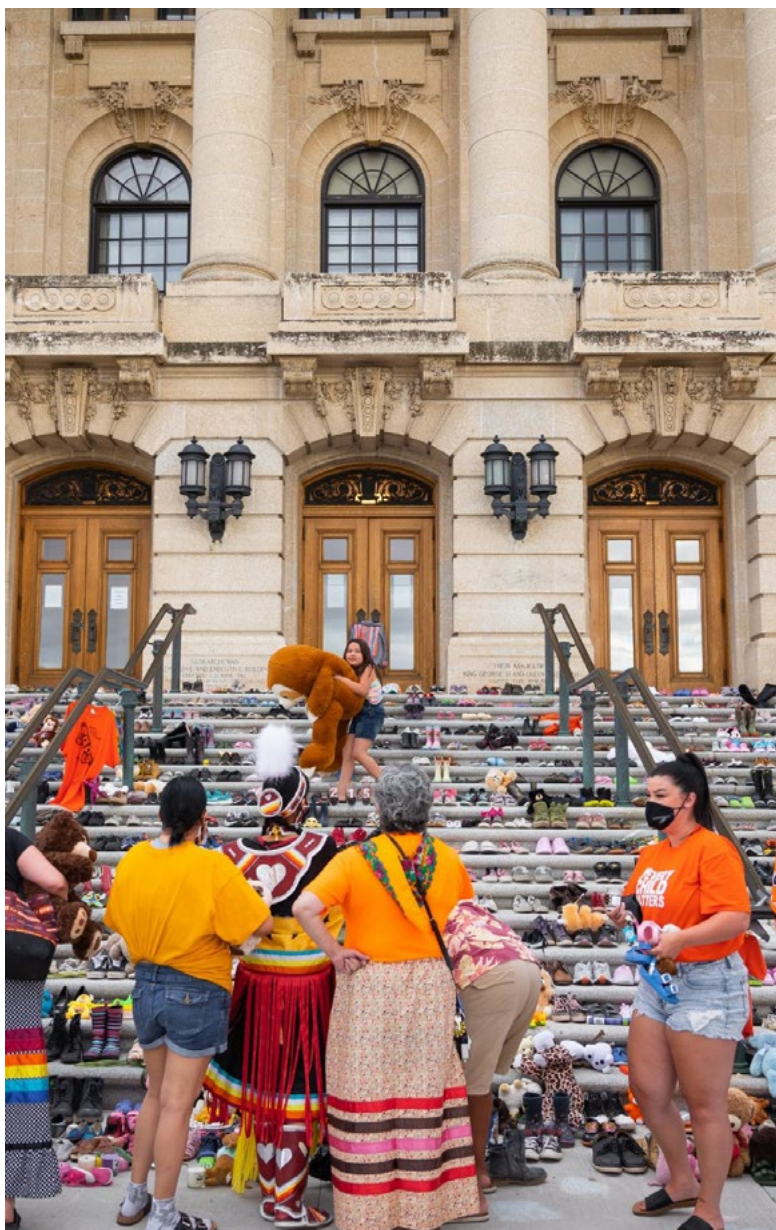
Reported non-Christian religious affiliation	Share of Canada's population (%)	
	2001	2021
Muslims	2.0	4.9
Hindus	1.0	2.3
Sikhs	0.9	2.1

The Legacy of Christian Faith-Built Assets

As Canada continues to become a more secular society, the role of faith-built assets is changing alongside a greater awareness of their colonial legacy.¹⁸

The thousands of Christian-affiliated assets situated in prime urban, suburban, and rural locations offer unparalleled opportunities to address pressing social issues, such as affordable housing, childcare, food insecurity, and mental health services. Many date as far back as the 17th century – first under French then British colonization – now represent a massive real estate portfolio.

As all orders of government and Christian faith-based organizations acknowledge the generational trauma and abuse caused by the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples and take steps toward reconciliation, adaptations of faith properties may provide tangible opportunities for both reparation and greater civic benefit.



Truth and Reconciliation: Calls to Action

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada makes multiple calls to action for church parties, faith groups, and interfaith social justice groups that are relevant to faith-based asset adaptation, including but not limited to:

- Formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation (Call to Action 48);
- Repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius (Call to Action 49); and
- Develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church's role in colonization (Call to Action 59).

First opened in August 2018, **Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall** is a permanent, Residential School Survivor-driven exhibit that transforms a former Residential School building in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario into a site of Indigenous storytelling and reconciliation.

The exhibition combines historical research, archival material, oral history narratives, and photo stations designed to be updated with new entries.



Image credit:
Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre



Image credit: Chevalier Morales Architectes



Nestled in Old Quebec City, Bibliothèque de Québec's contemporary **Maison de la littérature** is housed in a 19th century church, the former Wesley Methodist Temple. The Neo-Gothic building now houses a public library with a café that hosts a range of creative activities and annual programming, with writing rooms, a literary stage, a comic book workshop, a creative studio, and a writing residency.

The image shows the interior of a large, Gothic-style church that has suffered significant structural damage. The floor is covered in a thick layer of rubble, including broken stones, bricks, and debris. The walls are made of light-colored stone and feature pointed arches. The roof is exposed, showing a complex network of dark wooden beams and trusses. Sunlight streams in from windows on the right side, illuminating the debris and the architectural details. A blue banner with white text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

WHAT'S AT RISK?



At this moment, Canada is facing a generational shortage of affordable housing and community amenities.

Underutilized Christian-affiliated faith-built assets are highly desirable as potential sites for regeneration, new housing intensification, and a greater mix of uses, as spaces used by community groups, for educational and support groups, and for necessary social gathering and interaction.

Quantifying the Community Impact

These assets – essential not only to their own faith communities but to communities at large – are at risk. Changing demographics and overall declining engagement with Christian religious institutions (with Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism seeing the fastest growth in Canada) continue to diminish the capacity of Christian faith-based organizations to operate and maintain their properties, let alone invest in their future.

As a result, properties are often left underutilized, experiencing diminishing operational budgets, with owners unable to leverage its future investment potential to respond to community needs. Rarely do local congregations or the larger denominations that hold authority over these properties have the necessary expertise in real estate and asset management to guide them into the future.

In 2019, National Trust for Canada estimated that of the 27,000 faith properties in Canada, 9,000 were at risk of closure this decade.¹⁹ Therefore, the fate of thousands of faith buildings sitting underutilized or empty in core parts of our cities and communities demand collaborative approaches and innovative solutions.

These assets present a generational opportunity to create new stewardship models, update the functions of these buildings, and create financing models that benefit local communities for the long term.

Given the challenges of maintaining historic faith-built assets, this report asks:

- How can faith-built assets be purposefully transformed and financially equipped to serve their neighbourhoods and communities?
- What strategic and financial plans do faith property owners need to re-evaluate and repurpose their considerable assets?
- What are the models to pair the legacies of faith buildings with the needs of future worshippers, secular user groups, and communities?
- What is the role of municipalities and other regulators in enabling and supporting the preservation, adaptation, or reuse of these assets?
- Where are the best practices of collaboration between public entities, non-profits, private sector, and community partners?
- What ownership and governance models have been most successful?
- What is the potential for co-location and mixed-use development to make these sites more economically viable?

The “Halo Effect” – the socioeconomic benefits that places of worship with active congregations have on surrounding communities – is valued at \$15.5 billion,²⁸ demonstrating the significance of the loss if congregations decline and places of worship close permanently.²⁹

For generations, faith properties and institution have been supported by tax exemptions, donations, and institutional investment. Benefiting from tax exemption has often allowed faith properties to function while also providing affordable space or programming to the community at large.

For example, CUI estimates that the total annual property tax relief for the 2022 taxation year provided to faith-based organizations across Canada was over \$1 billion.²⁰


According to the Centre for Inquiry Canada, Canadian religious charities issued almost \$7 billion in official donation receipts in 2017. It conservatively estimates the lost tax revenue to be between \$1.58 and \$2.6 billion annually.²¹

In total, Canada's church denominations hold a legacy value of over \$30 billion in land and savings.²²

With this magnitude of assets and space, the scale of the opportunity for the adaptation of faith-built assets for greater civic benefit is massive. At the same time, the loss of these spaces – if redeveloped solely for private uses such as luxury condominiums – represents an enormous loss of civic-purpose space to accommodate non-profit and community-based organizations.



The Arch Lofts, Toronto, ON



There is more than 450 million square feet of space in faith buildings across Canada,²³ more than 50 times the floor space of all urban libraries in Canada (totalling 8.2 million square feet).²⁴

image credit: City Athletics Philly

PRESERVING SOCIAL PURPOSE INFRASTRUCTURE

image credit: Entremise



Adaptive reuse is not about preservation alone—it's about transformation.
It's about making old buildings speak to the present.

Françoise Astorg Bollack, Architect, Educator, and Preservationist, New York City

In 2022, Entremise conducted public consultation workshops to co-design the future of **l'église de Sainte-Anne-de-la-Rochelle** in Quebec. The objective was to maintain religious practice while opening the church to community uses.





image credit: Gregory M. Spencer



Kitsilano Neighbourhood House

provides a range of community-oriented services in the former St. George's Green Orthodox Church (a Classical Revival building opened in 1930) and the adjacent Hay House.

Stemming the Tide

Without intervention, the largest informal network of social purpose space in Canada will be significantly diminished. As these spaces are lost, we will see cascading effects, including the inability of funding-strapped non-profit organizations to remain rooted in the communities they serve.²⁶ The widespread loss of faith buildings also represents a tremendous loss of “third spaces” – places that offer opportunities for informal social connections outside of work and home.

Collectively, the value of faith-built assets is tremendous, socially and financially, and their longevity has been supported for decades through public investment in the form of tax exemptions. In Canada, the concept of religious taxation dates back to the English Statute of Charitable Uses of 1601, which granted charitable organizations – churches included – an exemption from taxes. This exemption was based on the belief that such organizations relieved the state of certain governmental functions.²⁷ But these assets also come with their own liabilities. The owners of faith properties and buildings – like the stewards of civic buildings of every kind (e.g. libraries, community centres) – are facing the challenges and costs of deferred maintenance and upkeep.

Understanding the scale of the opportunity and methods of adapting and reviving faith buildings and properties offers an opportunity for these spaces to remain, or evolve, for civic and community use.

More specifically, evaluating the role of faith-built assets at the scale of the main street or neighbourhood provides an opportunity to collectively determine the enabling conditions that would remove barriers to creative transformations at larger scales and at all levels of leadership and decision-making.



We all know that the fabric of community throughout North America is under great strain, and its fibres are regularly tearing. It is impossible to think that the disappearance of thousands of faith communities and associated third spaces is neither a cause of this rending nor a potential (if partial) remedy. It is imperative that governments at all levels respond to this crisis by rethinking development and planning processes that make it so difficult for faith communities to renew their site. The provision of support and coordination for faith communities would also be an enlightened use of government resources.

Russell Daye, United Church Minister (2024)

Faith-built assets, underutilized or sitting idle, have the potential to be strategically leveraged to meet enduring urban challenges and improve quality of life in communities. Non-profits and community-based organizations increasingly require affordable spaces to offer services. The non-profit housing sector lacks the land assets and financial instruments to fill the housing gap. Similarly, organizations and informal groups that once used a faith building, parking lot, or basement for gatherings may cease to exist.

Research and case studies reveal that a variety of faith communities, institutional and civic partners, and collaborators across Canada and the United States are stepping up to meet these needs in creative ways – through adaptive reuse, redevelopment, and renewal for greater civic purpose. But many more require guidance on how to emulate and adapt these initiatives in their own contexts.

Therefore, this report includes a set of actions that encompasses many different partners and interested parties to establish a future scenario where faith-built assets are adapted to potentially continue to serve their worshippers while benefiting the wider communities they operate in.

The suggestions are focused on measuring the potential scale of the opportunity through better data collection and analysis, reimagining the role of faith-built assets in city building, connecting faith communities to readily available partners and expertise, and identifying financially sustainable solutions.



Among land-owning Christian congregations, 3,250 are experiencing multi-year deficits and have less than three years of cash reserves.

Congregations at an Impasse

Many Christian congregations and denominations across Canada are struggling to address the future of their buildings, properties, and infrastructure. A combination of uncertain leadership and authority, and how denominational decisions are made (or not made) makes for slow and often stalled decision-making. Hampered by a lack of experience in asset management, real estate development, and community partnerships, faith leadership can be ill-equipped to pursue redevelopment options, or unsure of whether to do so. This leaves many faith-built assets in a holding pattern – with congregations unable to continue in the current context but also incapable of forging a new future that includes the current congregation, or pursuing one that leverages their assets in partnerships, for an alternative and potentially more robust set of uses.

Admittedly, adaptive reuse of faith buildings and redevelopment of faith properties is complex. It requires a shift in governance and business models, new partnerships, community involvement, potential zoning changes, the management of skilled trades, and the securing of financial resources. Fortunately, the resources and expertise a faith community may lack is readily available in multi-sectoral partners and highlighted in current examples.



Repurposing faith-built assets for greater civic use requires the expertise and patient engagement of a range of actors to realize a sustainable future that includes both secular and faith communities:

Property owners (denominations)

Building users and other community members (non-profit expertise)

Developers (business plans, planning approvals and construction)

Real estate experts (market valuation)

Financial institutions (loans and financing)

Insurers (providing liability and compensation as required);

Architects (site evaluation, feasibility, adaptive reuse schemes, and architectural design);

Heritage experts (designation and funding mechanisms)

Municipalities (planning strategies, policies, and regulation)

Visionaries, thought leaders, and city-builders

Cultivating an ecosystem of collaborative partners and solutions for faith-built asset adaptation will also take local, national, and institutional partnerships, similar to what is needed to meet the demand for affordable housing in communities across Canada.

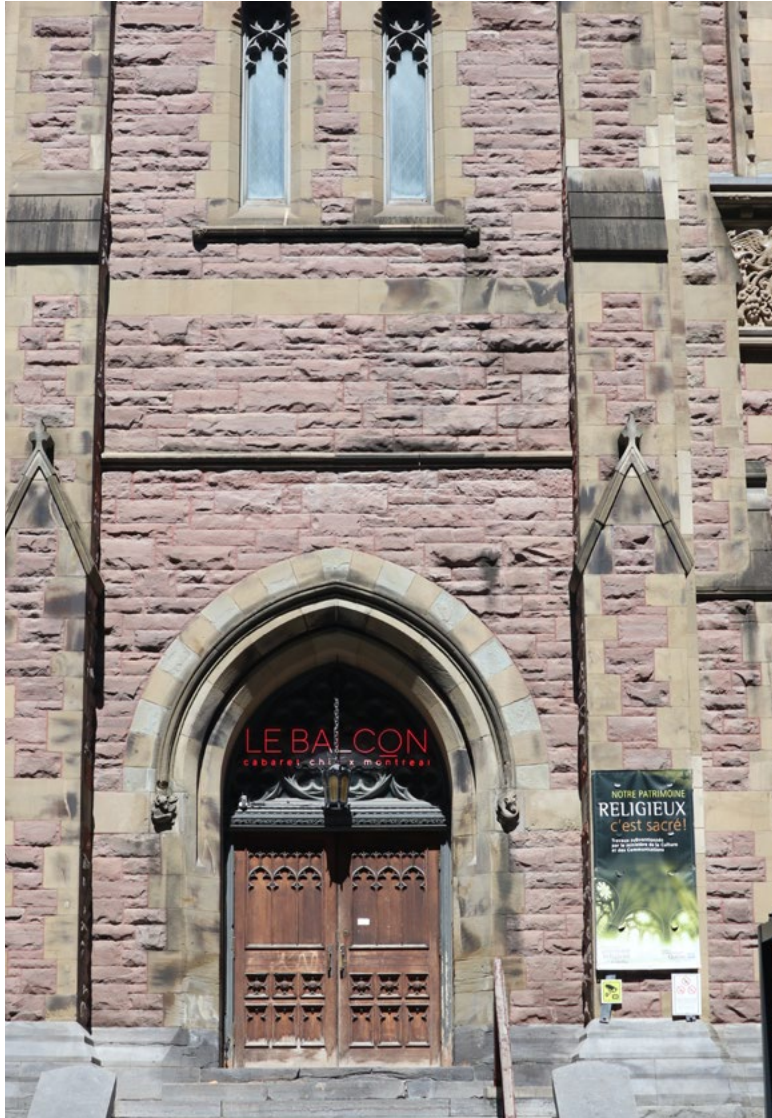
Principles for Faith-Built Asset Adaptation

This report is anchored in guiding principles that serve as guideposts to ground faith-built asset adaptation in serving the greater civic good. Without such principles, market-driven development (or inaction) will supplant any social capital and civic value that, once gone, cannot be recouped.



Alma Sandy Hill Apartments, Mann Ave Ottawa, ON

1. **Do no harm:** Consider social impact, including recognition of the commitment by faith communities to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, addressing the needs of a community's most vulnerable groups and residents, and to intentionally avoid perpetuating and/or worsening generational harms.
2. **Foster a strengthened sense of belonging and civic attachment:** Leverage adaptation to benefit the broader community beyond those with religious affiliations and to provide widely accessible third spaces and amenities that foster connections across diverse socio-demographic groups.



Le Balcon, Montreal, QC

3. **Preserve where possible:** Before considering demolition and replacement, prioritize adaptive reuse to reduce building material waste, preserve embodied emissions in the existing structure, and maintain cultural landmarks.
4. **Function over form:** While preserving a building's heritage characteristics is ideal, the potential civic benefit of rehabilitation, adaptive reuse, and/or redevelopment to meet current and future community needs drives the change.
5. **Respond to local needs:** Leverage adaptation to address diverse needs, informed by place-specific context, existing and historic relationships within a neighbourhood, and the availability of other amenities and services.

The **Talbot Street Church** is a refurbished and expanded facility focused on serving the downtown London community in Ontario. While the original sanctuary continues to host worship and performances, the glass-enclosed atrium extension accommodates a new community kitchen and a variety of youth programs.





image credit: Samanda Brace

The former Calvary Evangelical Church in Regina's Cathedral neighbourhood, Saskatchewan is now the **Artesian on 13th**, home to Artesian Performing Arts, a non-profit arts organization.

Since its opening in 2011, the multipurpose arts space has been rented for hundreds of events each year, from performances and presentations to weddings and parties.

CHALLENGES TO ADAPTATION





The barriers to adaptation of faith-based assets are many, but the alternative – a loss of thousands of buildings, tens of thousands of square feet of community space, and hundreds of thousands of hours of community-focused programming – makes it an urgent problem worth solving.

The most frequently cited challenges are as follows.

Financial Constraints

Operating costs:

- Increased utility and maintenance costs
- Poor energy efficiency of buildings
- Lack of operational funding as congregation numbers and donations decline
- Ever increasing insurance premiums or lack of insurance options

Maintenance:

- Deteriorating facilities
- Years of funding shortfalls
- Escalations in severity of repairs
- Outdated HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) systems
- Capital costs requiring diversion of financial resources from religious and community programming
- Unmanageable repairs due to age of buildings

Heritage and craftsmanship:

- Need to preserve heritage characteristics and municipal heritage by-law requirements
- Dwindling number of relevant skilled trades in historic craftsmanship



L'église de Saint-Nazaire-d'Acton, Quebec City QC

image credit: Entremise

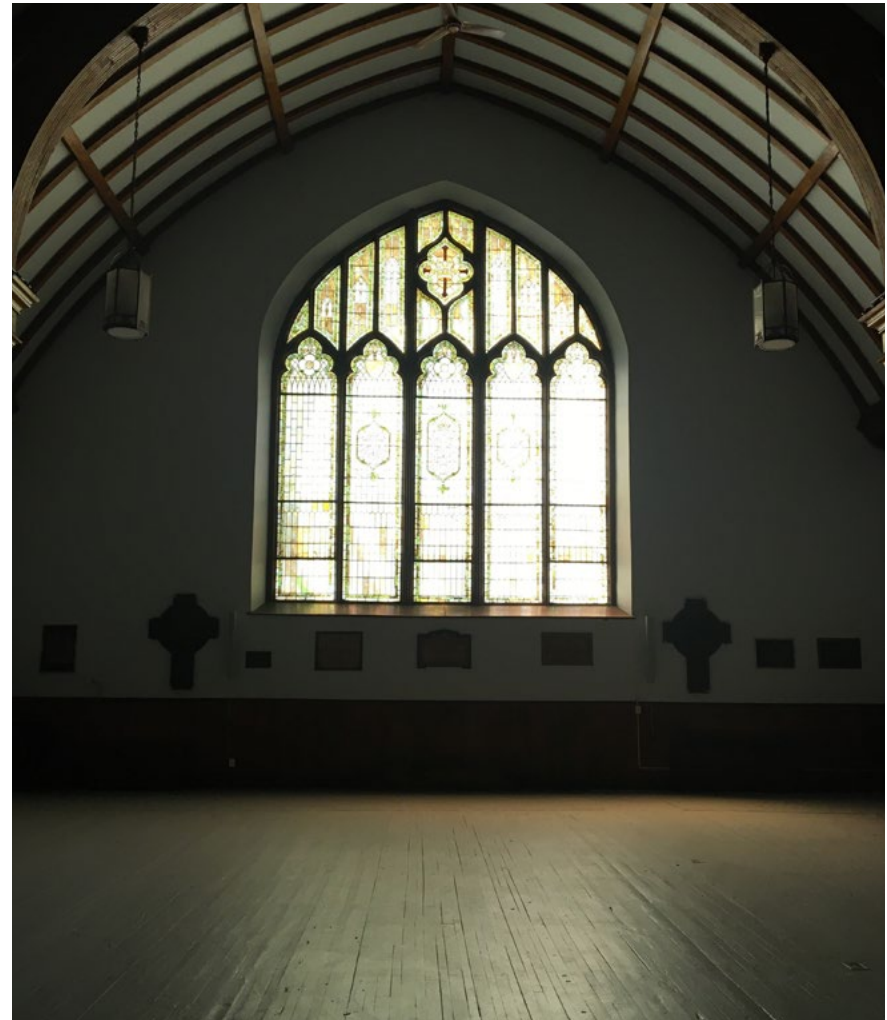
Shifts in Demographics and Habits

Declining religiosity:

- Generational decline means youth are not replacing aging members
- Declining pool of volunteers and donors
- Lower attendance at religious services

COVID-19 and the virtual mass:

- Rise in popularity of online worship and less in-person involvement
- Regional competition for a smaller pool of in-person attendees
- International competition for online attendance



All Saints Ottawa, Ottawa ON

Expertise and Leadership

Capacity and expertise:

- Church leadership often lacks the capacity to manage re-visioning or re-purposing process
- External expertise is unidentified or at great distance from the community or asset
- Lack of funding to hire and retain necessary expertise
- Unique financial risks of adaptive re-use projects due to the complexity of an existing building and the lack of institutional/denominational models or best practices to follow

Lack of planning and development knowledge:

- Congregations, denominations, and other faith property owners often lack experience in navigating land use policy, regulations, and planning approvals processes required to re-purpose properties
- Church leadership lacks informed relationship with municipalities and other regulators
- The potential risk of predatory activities due to inexperience of owners looking for solutions

Policies and Regulations

Municipal land use policy and regulation:

- Faith communities are rarely involved in the creation of municipal plans and strategies, thereby lacking knowledge of the process or informing the outcomes
- “Places of Worship” are identified as *institutional use* in zoning “by-laws”, limiting creative or flexible uses, co-location, and development opportunities without lengthy, costly, or risky policy changes

Heritage preservation:

- Heritage designation requirements differ by planning authority, limiting scalable replication across jurisdictions
- Protections for designated heritage characteristics can include both exterior structures and interior characteristics thus limiting reuse or refurbishment in small to significant ways
- Heritage designations can add additional costs for preservation and restoration, though grant funding is sometimes available for heritage properties

In Sherbrooke, Quebec, the Église Christ-Roi, a Gothic Revival style church with vaulted ceilings, has been transformed into a climbing gym by Vertige Escalade.



image credit: Vertige Escalade



image credit: KPMB Architects

The redevelopment of **St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church** in midtown Toronto, Ontario will see the original church replaced by a modern, human-scale faith building within a larger redevelopment that includes a residential tower set back to the north to accentuate the landmark position of the new church.

FAITH IN THE FUTURE: OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES





Hampered by untenable cost escalations in deferred maintenance, and with dwindling congregations, Christian-affiliated faith-built assets will continue to disappear. Without interventions to recover and secure alternative means of generating revenue, these trends will result in the closure of thousands more faith buildings in communities across Canada.

Due to their role in providing affordable spaces for community-based organizations – those that would not be able to operate otherwise – further waves of closures will result in a significant loss of social purpose infrastructure. More communities will be left without necessary services as faith-built places of community gathering and social connection continue to deteriorate to the point of abandonment or sale.

Given these challenges, there are at least two scenarios that could unfold for at-risk faith properties in communities Canada-wide:

- The loss of civic value inherent to faith properties, and
- A reimagined future that sees these properties evolve in response to the needs of communities and neighbourhoods.



Considerations for the Adaptation of Faith-Built Assets

To consider the potential of faith-built assets to be adapted for renewed purpose and greater civic benefit, the following factors must be considered. Each will play a pivotal role in the range of possible strategies and approaches for adaptation and future uses.

Market conditions, land value, and budgets to consider the development or sale of asset

- Market demand typical of urban (high pressure) and rural (low pressure) locations
- Land value to bring to a sale or joint venture opportunity
- Access to development and heritage expertise
- Feasibility study and full project costing of proposed renovation and/or restoration
- Long-term financial plans and budgets.

Building characteristics and conditions

- Age
- Design
- Materials
- Original construction methods
- Building layout and features
- State of repair.

Urban form and location

- Street access and accessibility of locations and buildings
- Surrounding context
- Infrastructure
- Transportation options
- Parking availability

Governance and legal structures

- Building and property ownership
- Leadership structure between faith-based organizations and faith communities
- Potential partnerships and governance arrangements
- Social and financial capital
- Applicable federal, provincial, and municipal laws, policies, and regulations.

Policies and regulations

- Official plans
- Secondary or neighbourhood plans
- Zoning by-laws (permitted uses, performance standards)
- Planning approvals (site plan control, minor variances, urban design review)
- Heritage designation
- Planning justification and necessary amendments for any proposed change or new development.

Financing

- Legal requirements and liability (insurance)
- Taxation status may change with new uses introduced
- Available capital and investment opportunities
- Philanthropic support and donations
- Access to lending programs.



Maison de la littérature, Quebec City, QC

image credit: Chevalier Morales
Architectes

The former St. James the Apostle Anglican Church's transformation into **St. Jax**, in Montreal, Quebec, reimagines the idea of church's supportive role in society, as a radically open and inclusive space. Espace Jax was created in 2019 to manage the secular activities of the church, with a mission to provide affordable space for organizations and activities which have a positive impact on society.





Saint-Charles Church in Ottawa, Ontario was sold in 2014 after laying vacant for several years. Architecture firm Linebox Studio redeveloped the site into **Saint-Charles Market**, adding residential density in an L-pattern wrapping around the original building. The public square ensures that the front of the church remains a community gathering for the Beechwood Village neighbourhood.

PATHWAYS FORWARD



As communities Canada-wide face a multitude of urban challenges, underutilized faith-built assets have the potential to be leveraged to implement solutions in the interests of many – the owners of these assets, the neighbourhoods surrounding them, the non-profits that rely on them to deliver essential services, and governments mandated to improve socioeconomic outcomes.

Ensuring faith properties can continue to provide civic benefit into the 21st century requires reimagining their role, function, and governance in Canadian society as valuable civic assets.

This will require multi-sectoral collaboration, experimentation, iteration, and honest conversations between secular and faith-based organizations.



The following priorities and actions inform elements of a scalable adaptation strategy for faith-built assets facing financial sustainability challenges. The focus of this section is to spark a conversation in communities of all sizes. It provides a range of options and actions to stem the loss of these valuable assets and enable their continued use and presence.

A Summary of Actions is provided in the section that follows. Detailed Actions with potential instigators and additional examples can be found in Appendix B.



Glebe Community Centre, Ottawa, ON
image credit: Glebe Neighbourhood Activities Group

PRIORITY 1

Quantify the Social Impact

It is widely accepted that Canada is experiencing a wave of church closures, yet the social impact of the loss of this asset portfolio and its impact on communities is not well documented. Stemming the tide in the ongoing loss of social purpose space requires better approaches to data collection and inventory analysis. Knowing the location of faith-built assets, who owns them, what services they provide, and who uses them, in combination with understanding the needs of surrounding communities, is required to inform a nationally coordinated strategy. Reimagining the role of faith-built assets means recognizing them as civic infrastructure for community well-being, similar in importance to libraries, community centres, public, and green spaces.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from open databases at the federal and municipal level, and ongoing work to quantify the socioeconomic benefit that religious congregations contribute to local communities.

Objective: Measure the scope and social impact of faith properties and closure trends, and track potential for adaptive reuse.

Outcome: Clear identification of faith-built assets that offer the greatest potential for adaptation to serve civic needs.

ACTIONS

Create a publicly accessible national inventory dataset of faith properties, including their location, type, and ownership status, to be updated regularly.

Measure the social impact of faith-built assets through socioeconomic and demographic analysis, establishing a foundation for evaluating their contribution to community well-being.



Bonar-Parkdale Presbyterian, Toronto ON

image credit: Relèven

PRIORITY 2

Co-Design Transformation

Faith properties are often located at the centre of communities, on main streets, and in urban areas targeted by municipalities for strategic growth. Building on the historic role of faith properties in the provision of social good requires imagining new civic and cultural functions that can be accommodated in and around these buildings. This will form the foundation of policy and regulatory change with the goal of enabling the transformation of faith properties into multi-purpose community hubs, co-locating community services and facilities, mixed market housing, commercial, and incubator spaces. The opportunities for transformation are as diverse as the actors interested in leveraging them.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from inventory mapping in Montreal, the adaptation

of churches into community centres, public libraries, incubator hubs, and a range of co-located and new uses, and the need for multi-sectoral collaboration. Actions supporting Truth and Reconciliation are inspired by ongoing work to identify the obligations borne of religious colonial land acquisition and how faith-built assets can evolve to support the resurgence of Indigenous Peoples. The last action proposes new educational relationships to teach historic restoration in support of faith-built asset adaptation.

Objective: Reimagine the role of faith-built assets as dynamic, multi-purpose community hubs.

Outcome: Shift in public perception of the role of faith properties in evolving neighbourhoods and communities.

ACTIONS

Identify strategic opportunity sites to direct investment for maximum civic benefit, such as faith properties located on or near main streets, major transit station areas, and downtowns.

Consider the potential of faith properties to accommodate a variety of uses and functions, including but not limited to:

- community services
- supportive and affordable housing
- climate resilience centres (e.g. extreme weather shelter)
- meeting and co-working space
- community space
- skills development, entrepreneurial (business incubators), and cultural supports
- pop-up events and markets
- commercial kitchens
- recreational and cultural activities
- continued worship.

Facilitate collaboration between municipalities and faith-based organizations to establish ongoing working relationships and co-design

planning policies, land use plans, zoning by-laws, strategies, and community service programming affecting faith properties, and to leverage available assets for municipal strategic objectives.

Co-design of faith-built asset adaptation with impacted Indigenous communities, including development concepts, scenarios, and programming for the purpose of creating dedicated space for Indigenous-led cultural, spiritual, and economic uses.

Comply with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and duty to consult Indigenous communities to guide faith property adaptation and identify tangible initiatives to incorporate reparation, to advance reconciliation.

Partner with trade schools and professional trades associations to teach historic restoration and upgrades to historic structures, using heritage faith buildings as laboratories and apprenticeship opportunities.

PRIORITY 3

Build Enabling Frameworks

Pursuing faith-built asset adaptation is complex and involves an entangled web of relationships and varied interests within and between diverse organizations (both faith-based and secular), government policy and regulation, feasibility assessment, financing options, and planning and development processes. There is a need for a Canada-wide community of practice, with regional clusters, consisting of property owners, faith-based organizations, planning and development experts, non-profits, secular community-based organizations, philanthropic foundations, social impact investors, post-secondary institutions, and governments.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from the community benefits achieved when faith-based organizations and property owners access expertise and resources to facilitate faith-built asset adaptation, along with promising planning regulatory reform and tools. The last action proposes the exploration of land title transfers and leases for public goods activation.

Objective: Establish the necessary coalitions to enable adaptation and transformation and highlight inspiring examples and effective frameworks for navigating diverse interests, coalition building, governance, funding, and revenue generation.

Outcome: A strong network of partners and resources supporting faith-built asset adaptation across Canada.

ACTIONS

Establish a national network, organized into regional clusters, of practitioners and actors, to support knowledge mobilization, multi-sectoral partnerships, and coalition building.

Publish a faith-built asset adaptation guidebook laying out a roadmap for identifying and securing funding sources and navigating faith property adaptation, from engagement and coalition building to planning, redevelopment, governance, property management, and securing community benefits.

Amend municipal land use policies and zoning by-laws for greater flexibility to enable the introduction of revenue-generating uses and streamline planning approvals for faith property adaptation, by:

- permitting additional residential, commercial, institutional uses, and a greater mix of uses as-of-right to enable co-location of non-institutional uses on faith properties currently limited by zoning for institutional or as places of worship

- permitting greater density and massing to enable intensification of sites on main streets and in strategic growth areas
- eliminating parking minimums.

Implement municipal policy area or zoning overlays to allow for density bonusing, transfer of development rights, and/or sale of air rights for faith-built adaptation projects and adjacent public or private development projects where existing community uses are retained and/or enhanced to encourage the preservation of faith buildings without restricting neighbourhood evolution or intensification.

Explore alternate tenure models such as a municipal program to enable the transfer of title for faith properties or long-term lease agreements to a municipality for public use, sale, or sublease with requirements on title or lease for public goods activation.

PRIORITY 4

Secure Resources

Many faith-built asset owners face challenges with funding the maintenance of their buildings, and require alternative revenue sources that can be secured through redevelopment. But building the capacity to pursue adaptation requires significant up-front funding, which presents the greatest hurdle to transforming faith-built assets.

Adaptation requires major feasibility studies involving assessment of properties, buildings, and space; multi-sectoral consultation and engagement; and servicing and impact studies. This all requires funding to recruit expertise and build capacity to navigate pre-development, planning and approvals, construction, and property management.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from the stacking of public, private, and philanthropic funding to develop affordable housing on faith properties, the adoption of portfolio management approaches by denominations with large real estate holdings, and the use of joint venture partnerships to consolidate expertise and share risk. In response to the major hurdle of financing land acquisition and adaptation, examples of social purpose governance and financing mechanisms, such as community land trusts and community bond campaigns, provide inspiration for neighbourhood coalitions interested in securing underutilized faith-built assets for their communities. Emergent climate tools such as greenhouse gas emissions calculators and a range of public energy efficiency programs are promising tools identify and action opportunities to keep faith buildings out of landfills.

Objective: Secure funding and resources to enable long-term community-oriented adaptation of faith-built assets.

Outcome: Adaptation is financially sustainable, ensuring that faith-built assets can continue to serve communities into the future or are replaced through community benefits.

ACTIONS

Identify funding opportunities from federal, provincial, municipal, private sector, philanthropic, and social impact investors for faith-built asset adaptation projects.

Adopt portfolio management approaches for conducting faith-built asset inventory analyses to identify key redevelopment opportunity sites, consolidate services, and sell underperforming and failing assets to fund the maintenance, upgrades, adaptation, and programming of other strategic assets within a faith-based organizational portfolio.

Secure alternative revenue for faith building maintenance, upgrades, and adaptive reuse by introducing new uses in the redevelopment of underutilized faith-built assets.

Leverage joint venture partnerships to share expertise and risk in faith-built asset adaptation.

Utilize social purpose governance and financing options such as community land trusts and community bonds to fund faith-built asset acquisition and adaptation.

Utilize emerging climate tools, such as greenhouse gas emissions calculators, to quantify the financial and climate costs and benefits of faith building versus demolition, informing public funding programs, and municipal incentives designed to keep building materials out of landfills.

Identify and apply existing building energy efficiency programs to adaptation projects, such as energy performance upgrades, recycling of materials, and/or retrofits.



Conclusion

As with all aspects of urbanism, no two contexts are the same. The same is true for the future of faith-built assets. In some cases, redevelopment may be straightforward with an opportunity for a new mixed-use development to emerge that builds upon or retains some aspects of the heritage of the site and provides for ongoing religious and secular uses. In other cases, the math will not work without new forms of investment and the engagement of additional institutional and public support.

In every case, the through line is this: communities and their municipal governments, to ensure maximum community benefit, need to get ahead of the transitions faith-built assets are experiencing. They need to support (and not impede) new forms of stewardship and development, and ensure that crucial civic uses, such as affordable housing, small business incubators, and creative and collaborative spaces, are central to the future use of properties that have served and benefited from communities for generations. Such initiatives can be supported by all orders of government: municipal, regional, provincial, and federal.

This report offers a provocation meant for everyone. Adaptation of faith-based assets is not a linear, step-by-step process, but rather an iterative one, different in every instance. It is one that needs to be accelerated to match rapidly growing needs and waning means and capacity.

Our key conclusions to support the future of faith-built assets are as follows:

Quantifying the social impact of faith-based assets will reveal the scope of the loss, but more importantly, the opportunity:

The ongoing loss is significant and not confined to worshippers, and once made visible will spur solutions at scale.

Governments need to act to remove outdated rules: The necessary regulatory changes to land use and lending will enable the transformation of faith-based assets in line with socioeconomic objectives.



Lumino, Montreal, QC

Wide gaps in understanding need to be filled: Municipal staff, professional planners, and a range of industry actors need to better understand the governance and financial challenges that faith property owners are facing to identify and enable creative strategies to overcome them.

Examples of successful adaptation are plentiful and provide lessons for all: Many share a common component – a clear risk-taker who steps up to lead and build a broad coalition of partners.

**The decline of Christian faith properties is not a fire sale,
but it could quickly become one if new partnerships cannot
be forged quickly among faith-based organizations,
faith property owners, developers, and civic partners.**

Hopefully, our shared faith in the importance of people and place will align to change the narrative from one of church closures to community renewal. We each have agency and must find ourselves and our sector somewhere in this work, to create new futures for the spaces faith built.

APPENDIX A: CASE STUDIES



Cathedrale Christ Church, Montreal, QC

CASE STUDY 1

City-Wide Inventory Analysis in Montreal

PROJECT:

**Montreal Round Table
on the Transition of Religious Property**

LOCATION:

Montreal, Quebec

Overview

The Montreal Round Table on the Transition of Religious Property

(Table Ronde de Montréal sur la Transition du Patrimoine Religieux) is a multi-sectoral initiative exploring the redevelopment of religious properties in the face of closures in Montreal. In 2023, Relèven – a non-profit focused on transforming underutilized churches into community hubs and affordable housing –

brought together all three levels of government, heritage, foundations, the arts, immigration, and other civic organizations, as well as faith-based organizations, including denominational authorities from the city of Montreal.

The objectives of the Round Table included:

- identifying places of faith that may be undergoing or in need of significant property transition;
- identifying secular charities and non-profits who may be interested in “equity-type partnership” in these locations;
- presenting inspiring case studies to help Montreal lead a Canada-wide shift; and
- connecting viable projects with the social finance, legal, urbanistic, and architectural resources required. ³²

Together, the Round Table explored how Montreal’s churches, synagogues, monasteries, and other religious properties could be repositioned to serve the social economy. ³³

The research and engagement findings of Phase 1 are summarized in a Final Report in 2023. Through a data synthesis and mapping exercise, the Round Table identified fifteen key opportunity sites representing a “real potential for community needs” if leveraged for transition. ³⁴

Enabling conditions

According to Relèven's Director of Research, Mike Wood Daly, the Round Table garnered interest at every level of government, from the City's neighbourhood round tables (tables de quartier – semi-formal, community-led task forces connected to the local councillor), the provincial heritage ministry (Le ministère de la Culture et des Communications – interested in the architectural and cultural significance of historic Catholic churches, and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC – interested in the potential for scale). Other interested parties included municipal planners, service providers, heritage groups, arts groups, church congregations, and senior denominational leaders.

Relèven launched the Round Table with financial support from philanthropic foundations based in Montreal. This funding enabled Relèven to conduct a literature review of faith property redevelopment in Canada looking at costs and timelines, impacts of heritage regulations, the importance of religious symbols, and the role of public administration. Considering the lack of a publicly available Canadian national and regional datasets on the location and status of places of worship, the Round Table's quantitative research tread new ground in faith-built asset mapping.

Relèven used T3010 data, collected by Canada Revenue Agency through its annual, mandatory Registered Charity Information Return, to identify the addresses of religious charities. CUI attempted to map these same addresses at a national scale but found that many reported addresses did not align with or identify the actual physical location of places of worship. To identify the location of 387 places of worship on the island of Montreal, Wood Daly's team conducted manual checks of T3010-reported addresses, which he characterized as difficult and time consuming.

With places of worship on the island of Montreal mapped, Relèven worked with interested parties to capture the financial health of each and identify key opportunity sites for redevelopment that would best serve surrounding communities.

The Round Table's Final Report 2023 included a series of maps, each identifying:

- **Location**
- **Land and buildings with declared value**
- **Total assets**
- **Annual deficit**
- **Expenditure 30% higher than income**
- **Occupancy costs 30% or more of total expenditure**
- **Personnel costs 60% or more of total expenditure**
- **Risk of closure**
- **Real potential to address community needs**

The findings from Relèven's research were then presented to the Round Table as a whole. According to Wood Daly, they presented findings on the location of assets, challenges to development, accommodations each sector would need to make to enable redevelopment, funding issues, and key opportunity sites. During the Round Table, participants were asked, "How could you potentially partner with or use these properties?"

Civic benefit

Reimagining the role and function of faith properties in communities, combined with an inventory analysis and the identification of key opportunity sites, creates real potential to respond to community needs. In each case, it is imperative that those needs be defined by the community itself. Relèven identified a wide array of potential adaptations and the civic benefits that arise from each (see Table A.1). These adaptations are not mutually exclusive and can be considered in a variety of combinations to meet identified community needs, desires, and vision.

Table A.1: Relèven’s Identified Potential Civic Benefits of Reimagining Faith Properties

Adaptation Categories	Reimagined Uses	Civic Benefits
Housing	<p>Affordable Housing</p> <p>Mixed-Income Communities</p> <p>Supportive Housing</p> <p>Intergenerational Living</p> <p>Co-housing Models</p>	<p>Provides much-needed housing for low-income families, seniors, and vulnerable populations.</p> <p>Encourages socioeconomic diversity and addresses displacement pressures from gentrification.</p> <p>Offers stables homes with integrated services for seniors, individuals with disabilities, or those experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>Encourages diverse age groups to live together, fostering mentorship and cohesion.</p> <p>Promotes shared living spaces that enhance community connection and affordability.</p>
Economic	<p>Local Job Creation</p> <p>Small Business Incubation</p> <p>Increased Property Tax Revenue</p> <p>Retail and Service Hub</p>	<p>Generates employment through construction, maintenance, and program operations.</p> <p>Provides affordable spaces for startups, social enterprises, or cooperatives.</p> <p>Boosts municipal tax bases while ensuring responsible land use.</p> <p>Supports local businesses by integrating commercial spaces within developments.</p>

Adaptation Categories	Reimagined Uses	Civic Benefits
Social and Community	<p>Multi-Use Community Hubs</p> <p>Cultural and Arts Spaces</p> <p>Food Security Initiatives</p> <p>Education and Training Centres</p> <p>Mental Health and Wellness Centres</p>	<p>Combines services (i.e., healthcare, education, social services) in one accessible location.</p> <p>Preserves heritage buildings while creating performance venues, galleries, or artist studios.</p> <p>Includes community gardens, food banks, or commercial kitchens for food programs.</p> <p>Provides space for job training, literacy programs, and lifelong learning.</p> <p>Offers counseling, wellness programs, and social support networks.</p>
Environmental	<p>Sustainable Development</p> <p>Green Infrastructure</p> <p>Walkable Communities</p> <p>Urban Agriculture</p>	<p>Encourages adaptive reuse of existing buildings, reducing urban sprawl and waste.</p> <p>Incorporates energy-efficient designs, solar panels, and sustainable landscaping.</p> <p>Reduces reliance on cars by integrating housing, services, and transit access.</p> <p>Converts unused land into community gardens or urban farms.</p>

Adaptation Categories	Reimagined Uses	Civic Benefits
Faith and Mission Alignment	Continued Faith Presence Outreach and Social Justice Interfaith Collaboration Volunteer and Civic Engagement	Retains spiritual spaces within redeveloped properties. Strengthens faith communities' mission by addressing homelessness, poverty, and inequality. Creates shared spaces for different faith groups and community organizations. Encourages faith groups and residents to actively support community initiatives.

Lessons learned

The need for better data collection

Though it was a resource intensive process, and its scalability in other jurisdictions and at larger scales will require a significant overhaul of how data on places of worship are collected by government, the findings of the Round Table highlight the value of spatial mapping combined with an analysis of the financial health of places of worship to identify those at risk of closure.

The lack of a reliable, publicly accessible dataset on the location and status of places of worship hinders strategies at any scale to identify key opportunity sites without spending significant resources to manually verify addresses and locations. If any coherent national strategy on the adaptation of faith-built assets for greater civic benefit is to become possible, the scale of

the opportunity first needs to be identified before implementing the interventions necessary to leverage it. Otherwise, adaptations will continue to occur on a one-off basis with many properties falling through the cracks to be sold off to private interests without any community benefit secured.

Short of implementing better faith-built asset data collection methods at the federal level, the Round Table's framework for mapping and identifying opportunity sites serves as an example for emulation in other municipalities, if funding is available. According to Wood Daly, Relèven has been awarded federal grants to apply this framework in other Canadian cities, beginning in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Potential civic benefit comes in many forms

The breadth of adaptative categories, reimagined uses, and civic benefits that rise from the reimagining of faith properties provides many options for faith communities to leverage their assets to improve socioeconomic outcomes at the community-level. The form adaptation may take will depend on internal capacity and will, community need, connection to expertise, and securing funding.

While redevelopment is a complex process, the outcomes of socially driven initiatives have the potential to transform faith properties in a manner that benefits the neighbourhoods surrounding them.



image credit: Jp Valery



image credit: All Saints Anglican Church

CASE STUDY 2: Joint Venture, Mixed Market Housing Development in Winnipeg

PROJECT:

West Broadway Commons

LOCATION:

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Overview

All Saints Anglican Church (see Figure A.1) sits across the northwest corner of the Manitoba Legislative Building in Winnipeg's downtown West Broadway neighbourhood. The church's congregation was founded in 1884. In 1926, the church was replaced to accommodate a larger congregation. The contemporary building is an English Gothic grey stone church featuring the stained glass of the original.

When the congregation realized the accessory parish hall behind the church was in dire shape, they faced “impossibly high cost” to rehabilitate the structure.³⁶ The inability of the congregation to maintain the parish hall presented an opportunity to repurpose the land it stood on to both generate alternative revenue for the Church and support the neighbourhood. Redevelopment of the property in line with All Saints' vision

required an industry partner committed to social purpose real estate and access to federal funding.

West Broadway Commons (see Figure A.2), completed in 2021, took the place of the Church's parish hall. It is a twelve-storey, mixed-use, and mixed-market housing development featuring 110 residential units – of which 56 are affordable, the rest a mix of market-rate and premium units, and 23 are barrier-free – indoor bike storage, free car-pool membership, and a ninth-floor common area with a gym and patio.³⁷ Commercial spaces are also integrated at ground level.³⁸ The majority of the commercial space is leased by the Canadian Mental Health Association for their youth hub, while the second space is intended for a local café, restaurant, or shop.³⁹ The revenue generated has enabled the continued life of the congregation.

Enabling conditions

According to Sandi Mielitz, President of the West Broadway Commons Joint Venture Committee, the guidance of a friend of the church – an architect – helped All Saints secured \$10,000 in CMHC Seed Funding, which provided financial support for organizations involved in the initial phases of creating an affordable housing project. This initial funding allowed All Saints to contract SvN Architects + Planners to review the development potential of the site and conduct preliminary consultations in the West Broadway neighbourhood and with the City of Winnipeg’s Planning, Property & Development department staff. SvN also prepared preliminary conceptual scenarios, site plans, and costing for potential residential development. This initial grant enabled All Saints to access planning and development expertise not found in-house.

The remainder of the grant was used to launch a Request for Proposal (RFP) process with the goal of attracting a social impact-focused development partner to enter a joint-venture relationship to develop a mixed-market housing and mixed-use building. The RFP clearly stated the intention of the project was to serve the congregation and surrounding residents, have a positive impact in West Broadway and downtown, and create a stream of revenue to support the long-term social programming and activity of All Saints. Having identified the value of the parish hall site in a downtown redevelopment context, the RFP highlights All Saints’ proactive approach leveraging this asset to provide affordable housing options and community amenities, while generating alternative revenue for the life of the congregation and Church.

All Saints' Building Committee received seven proposals. Six were submitted by for-profit developers which offered fringe concessions, considered token offers – such as more studio rooms, a smudge room, or a nicer common area – to purchase the land. The seventh proposal was submitted by the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation 2.0 (UWCRC 2.0), a social outcomes-focused non-profit developer whose mandate allows it to enter joint-venture real estate developments.

Unlike the six for-profit developers, Mielitz emphasizes that UWCRC 2.0 was chosen because they were willing to navigate the lengthy and uncertain process of accessing government funding to subsidize housing units. Several months after UWCRC 2.0 became the

developer of the project, they entered into a joint venture agreement with All Saints for joint ownership of the building. This gave All Saints a long-term partner with expertise in housing and property management.

Before the building opened, it was agreed upon that UWCRC 2.0 would become the property manager. To remove any conflict of interest, this decision can be reviewed and renewed at intervals by the sole discretion of All Saints. The church facilities remain under the control of All Saints. Mielitz stressed that West Broadway Commons, with its mixed-market housing and community amenities, would not have been possible without UWCRC 2.0.

While the land is under the title of All Saints, the Church is unable to dispose land without the approval of the Diocese of Rupert's Land. But unlike other denominational authorities, there is no central body to manage the real estate portfolio of the Anglican Church. Given the good business sense of All Saints and the retainment of title, the Diocese was satisfied to give their approval and allow All Saints to manage the project. The joint venture leased the land for 60 years with two scheduled 20-year renewals. All Saints then redirected half of the lump sum lease payment back into West Broadway Commons for equity. Ownership of the building is split 51-49 with the majority stake under All Saints, ensuring long-term control of the building. Profits generated from residential and commercial rents are split the same way, with All Saints' portion supporting necessary

building maintenance and capital costs for the century-old Church, and UWCRC 2.0's portion addressing the University of Winnipeg's ongoing expenses and new social development opportunities.



Image credit: Bockstael

The financial feasibility of the project ultimately required a range of funding sources, from across all levels of government, local fundraising, philanthropy, and market-rate impact investment:

- All Saints Anglican Church: \$1.25 million
- UWCRC 2.0 supported by multi-fund manager, New Market Fund, a market-rate impact investment: \$1.2 million
- CMHC's National Housing Co-Investment Fund (renamed to Affordable Housing Fund): total \$25.6 million in direct financing; \$7.9 million of which was a forgivable loan
- Province of Manitoba's Rental Housing Construction Tax Credit: \$1.3 million
- City of Winnipeg's Housing Rehabilitation Investment Reserve: \$250,000
- Efficiency Manitoba's new building program energy efficiency grant incentives
- Philanthropic and private donations from Richardson Foundation, Jim and Leney Richardson, Michael Nesbitt, C. P. Loewen Family Foundation, and the Johnston Group ⁶⁴

Civic benefit

The ninth-floor common room (See Figure A.3A-B), overlooking the Assiniboine River, is a large space featuring collaborative and communal seating, Wi-Fi, an outdoor balcony and patio, and a barbecue grill. The gym is right beside the common area. At the ground floor, the Huddle Broadway is a walk-in mental wellness hub for youth run by the Canadian Mental Health Association. According to Mielitz, the Huddle pays affordable rent to conduct multiple group sessions a month in the common room.

Accessible to residents, Huddle Broadway, and the church, the common room promotes social activity and the mixing of diverse people.

Social events are held in the space throughout the year. This is key to achieving All Saints' vision of a building that responds to community needs and embraces diversity.

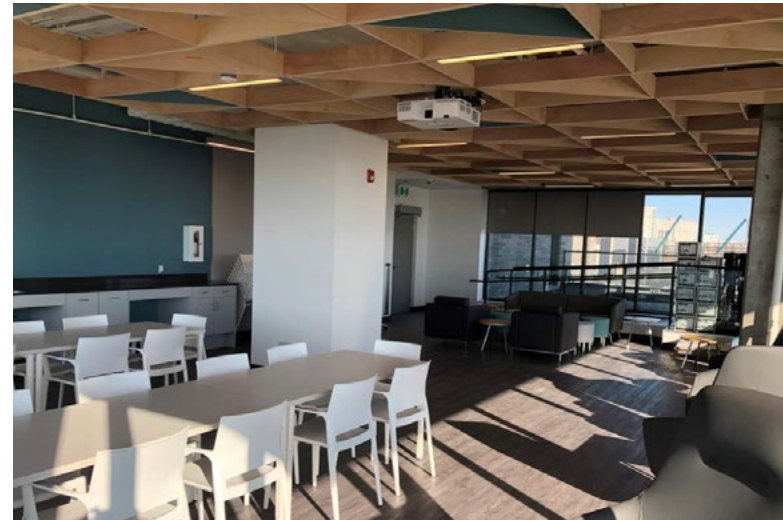


Figure A.3A: West Broadway Commons – Common Room

*Image credit:
West Broadway Commons*

Building on the theme of connection, market-rate and affordable units are undistinguishable from each other, mixed throughout the building. This represents a best practice approach to integrating affordable housing in market-rate development in a manner that promotes social cohesion and cross-socioeconomic connections.

Through a proactive approach to redevelopment, seed funding from CMHC, and joint venture partnership with a social outcomes-focused developer, the loss of the parish hall turned into an opportunity to create affordable housing and an amenity space that continues to host a range of users, ultimately securing greater civic benefit for the congregation and neighbourhood while generating alternative revenue for All Saints Anglican Church.



Figure A.3B: West Broadway Commons – Common Room

*Image credit:
West Broadway Commons*

Lessons learned

Social outcomes-focused redevelopment is essential to securing greater civic benefits

Unlike developers with significant amounts of capital driven to maximize profits, working with a not-for-profit developer helps to deliver community benefits for social impact.

All Saints Anglican Church's joint-venture with UWCRC 2.0 helped to bring development and property management expertise to West Broadway Commons and enabled both organizations to benefit from ongoing revenue generated by rents. The ability of UWCRC 2.0 to navigate access to public funding and social impact investment programs allowed All Saints to deliver on their goal of creating affordable housing units in downtown Winnipeg.

Government affordable housing programs can support churches' mixed-use and mixed-market housing redevelopment

The West Broadway Commons project utilized funding from the City of Winnipeg, the Province of Manitoba, and federal CMHC affordable housing-dedicated funding (seed funding for pre-development activities, mortgages, and forgivable loans) to achieve financial feasibility. For owners of faith-built assets looking to develop affordable housing, the range of funding available makes it possible to achieve within mixed-market housing development that promotes socio-economic mixing while encouraging social cohesion.

Values-driven developers provide capacity and expertise to those who need it

The development of West Broadway Commons highlights the potential for collaborative financing, expertise matching, and revenue sharing through joint-venture arrangements. UWCRC 2.0's mandate, besides developing real estate individually or through joint venture, is to provide development, project management, and related services to other non-profits. Their services were vital to delivering All Saints' project. Similar organizations could play the same role for faith-built asset adaptation in other cities.



Image credit: Bockstael



CASE STUDY 3: Rezoning for Density in Victoria

PROJECT:
Building for the Future

LOCATION:
Victoria, British Columbia

Overview

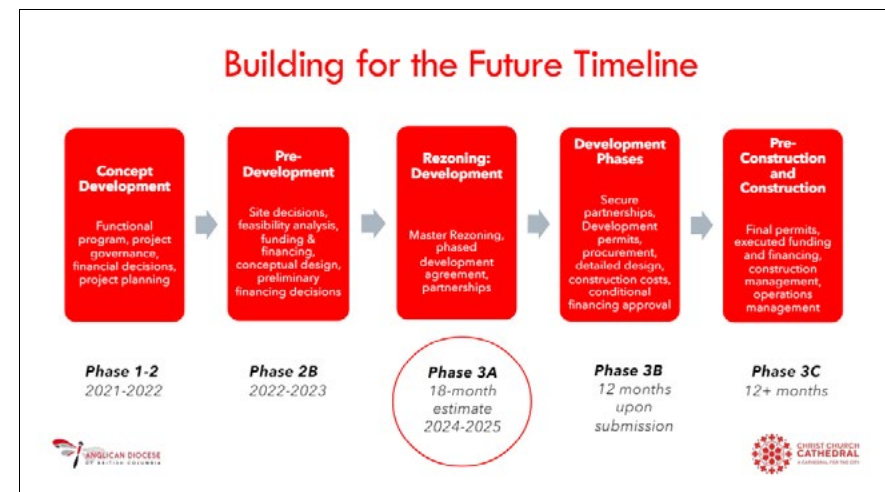
Building for the Future (BFTF) is a master planning initiative to redevelop the site of Christ Church Cathedral, located just outside the southeastern edge of Victoria, BC's downtown core. The site consists of three historic structures: the Cathedral itself, the Memorial Hall housing the Christ Church Cathedral School, and Yarrow Chapel.

The Cathedral, School, and Diocese represent the key parties stewarding the master plan. The 1.4-hectare site is owned solely by the Diocese.

The BFTF is multi-year initiative (see Figure A.4) building off the site's strengths – as a multi-generational centre for worship, music, arts, education, and community, and as

a landmark within Victoria's cultural heritage landscape – to introduce new residential and commercial uses and amenities to what is now being called Cathedral Commons.

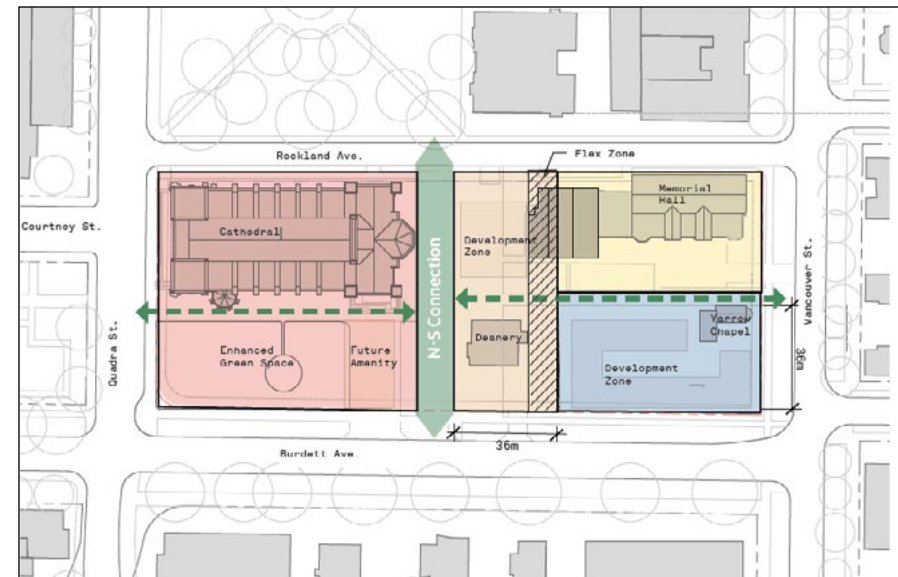
Figure A.4: Building for the Future – Timeline



Source: Christ Church Cathedral (2024)

The master plan is a comprehensive land use planning document and serves as the main submission for the Diocese’s rezoning application. The proposal sections Cathedral Commons into four quadrants (see Figure A.5): two development parcels with a total of four multi-unit predominantly residential buildings, with a combined 240-320 housing units with potential community and commercial spaces at grade. The Cathedral House building would be a standalone administrative, amenity and community space that would ‘complete’ the Cathedral which has long required upgrading, expansion in accessible service and programming areas.⁴⁴ The total floor area ratio for the site would increase from 2.0 to 2.5 ⁴⁵ signalling the intention for respectful densification that would complement the site’s central location between downtown and the residential area of Fairfield Neighbourhood.

Figure A.5: Cathedral Commons – Four Development Zones



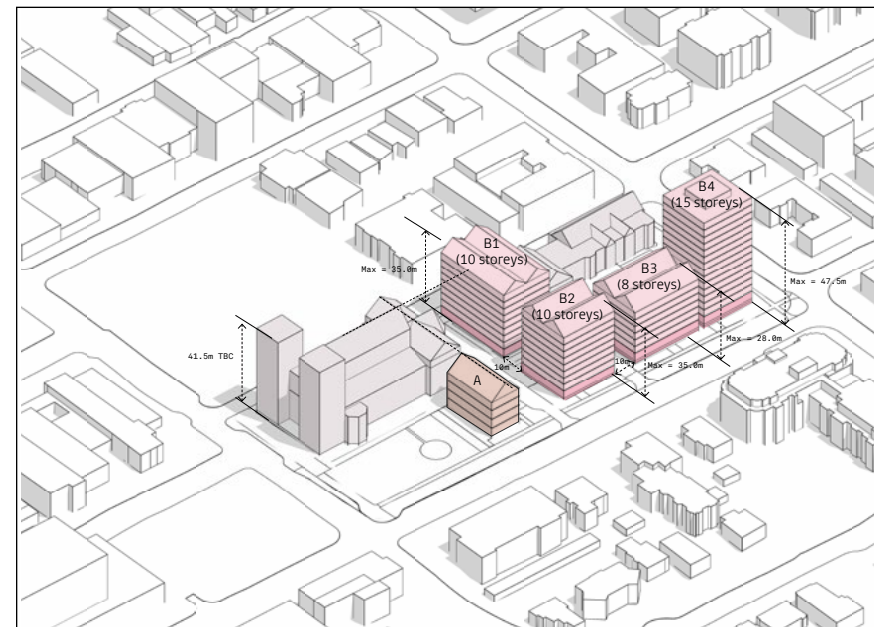
Source: FaulknerBrowns (2024)

As per Figure A.4, the project is currently in Phase 3A. After three years of external, internal and City staff engagement and charettes, the Diocese submitted the rezoning application for the master plan to the City of Victoria to propose amendments to both the zoning bylaw and the Official Community Plan in February 2024. City staff comments were initially received in March 2024 with revisions resubmitted in July 2024. As of writing in February 2025, the Diocese is preparing a second resubmission that incorporates the feedback received from the City in November 2024.⁴⁶ According to Sarah Murray, Project Planner at Wiser Projects, the Diocese is hopeful that their application will be forward to Council for review in the coming months.

The proposed residential development is intended to generate revenue to fund the phased heritage revitalization of the Cathedral, Memorial Hall, Yarrow Chapel, and additional amenities.

According to recent structural assessments, it is estimated that carrying out necessary repairs and seismic upgrades to heritage buildings on the property may cost up to \$50 million.⁴⁷ While no residential buildings are currently in the development pipeline, the master plan proposes massing that would dictate future development (see Figure A.6).

Figure A.6: Cathedral Commons – Four Development Zones



Source: FaulknerBrowns (2024)

Enabling conditions

The ongoing work of the BFTF initiative reflects the Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' organizational capacity and portfolio approach real estate management.

Brendon Neilson, Executive Director of the Diocese, describes a shift in his diocese's thinking. Departing from the past when property decisions were considered strictly case-by-case and independent of each other, the Diocese recently conducted a feasibility analysis of every property within its portfolio. Strategic sites were identified for the Diocese to develop, partner on, or use differently. Cathedral Commons is one site in a potential 15-year project pipeline.

The redevelopment of Cathedral Commons is being led independently by the Diocese to

“ensure the [master] plan remains grounded in community vision.”⁴⁸ But this did not preclude the hiring of external consultants to provide expertise not found in-house. Phase 1's concept development was fully funded by the Cathedral, while the cost of Phase 2's master planning exercise was evenly split between the Cathedral, School, and Diocese, capped at \$500,000 in total.⁴⁹

The Diocese recognized the potential benefit of engaging the City of Victoria early to develop a working relationship and align vision with municipal priorities. Engagement informing the master plan concept and work plan was led by Wiser Projects, a local planning firm, which built off the foundation of a previous consultation by Greater Works.

Leveraging the firm's established relationships with municipal staff, the City was brought into the process, according to Neilson, early on and for every step of the way.

Wiser Projects engaged the Cathedral and School (board, staff, and parents) early to define long-term needs and design goals. This was followed by external engagement with interested community partners. The Building for the Future Committee was also established to guide the process.⁵⁰ FaulknerBrowns Architects was then contracted as the architectural sub-consultant, authoring the dual Christ Church Cathedral Master Plan and rezoning proposal.

Key opportunities identified for Cathedral Commons included:

- more recognition and visitors;
- enhanced facilities for worship, performance, and exhibition;
- leveraging its positions as a key civic asset;
- continued support of the School;
- renewal and restoration of building interiors;
- shared services;
- opportunities to generate revenue on the site; and
- new opportunities for hospitality and community programming.⁵¹

The BFTF team adopted a proactive approach to potential partnerships, establishing a Terms of Reference for precinct development partnerships. Rather than react to individual requests, the Terms were issued to 16 potential development partners in September 2021.⁵² This allowed the project team to determine the nature of partnerships. Partnerships will be established after rezoning is achieved to start the development process on the site.



Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, BC

image credit: FaulknerBrowns (2025)

Civic benefit

Looking to examples in other cities and working with the City and community neighbours, BFTF has developed a concept to deliver a new shared democratic public space that will become the civic front door to the Cathedral. At a finer grain, it explores landscape and public realm strategies that expand on the existing mature landscape by adding north-south and east-west pedestrian routes through the site.

The three key objectives of the proposal are to:

1. reposition Cathedral Commons to be more accessible, offer more value to the surrounding context, and bring tangible benefits to neighbouring communities;
2. retain and celebrate the precinct's existing heritage; and
3. generate development density to expand the social, community, and cultural offer available on site, while also generating revenue to support the future financial viability, renovation, and upkeep of the cathedral and key heritage buildings. ⁵³

Lessons learned

The benefits of the faith-built assets portfolio approach

Authority over property decisions for Christian faith-built assets is often found at the denominational or regional level. Organizational capacity differs by denomination, but those with the ability and resources to hire consultants can better leverage their properties for greater civic benefit and improve financial sustainability. The Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' approach to managing their assets provides tangible benefits informing their long-term property strategy, allowing them to identify which properties to focus investment on and those they may be able to divest from if necessary.

Engage the municipality early

Engaging the City of Victoria early proved to be beneficial for the BFTF initiative. According to Neilson, the initial “let’s dream” conversations which included several large meetings with multi-departmental representation from the City, facilitated by Wiser Projects, provided good feedback at the early stages to set the parameters of the master plan and rezoning application. The inclusion of a north-south connector through the middle of the Cathedral Commons site reflects a desire of the City to improve connectivity through the wider neighbourhood. The ongoing working relationship helped to identify what was on and off the table, ensuring that the vision of the master plan aligned with municipal strategic objectives and good planning principles.

Understanding the history of religious land acquisition is the first step in reconciling its colonial legacy

In response to Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action #59, which calls on church parties to “ensure their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization...,”⁵⁵ the Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets hired a historian and researcher to determine how specific properties within its portfolio were acquired historically. The Cathedral District is one of twelve sites analyzed as of writing. Neilson frames this research exercise a way to intentionally “complicate” decisions around land and property to identify the Diocese’ contemporary obligations toward affected Indigenous Peoples.

As stated in the report for the Christ Church Cathedral Precinct, the history of this site “reveals Anglican participation in the colonial apparatus of the state.”⁵⁶ A table with members of the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations – preceding the BFTF initiative, disbanded during the pandemic and revived afterwards – is considering how to co-design the revitalization of Cathedral Commons’ South Lawn space with the goal to serve as a site of reconciliation and community needs.

Leveraging the public planning process

In addition to providing input into the rezoning process, the Cathedral and Diocese have been encouraging parishioners and community members to take part in the City's ongoing Official Community Plan Update public consultations. In the Cathedral's May 2024 update, "Engaging with this plan parallel to the rezoning application provides opportunities for some of the land use changes to be considered in the new plan, minimizing the requests through the rezoning application."⁵⁴ This reveals a savvy understanding by the Cathedral and Diocese of municipal decision-making processes and shows leadership in guiding community members to influence bureaucratically determined outcomes.





Image credit: Cathedral District-Jax, Inc.

CASE STUDY 4: Downtown Neighbourhood Revitalization in Jacksonville, FL

PROJECT:

Cathedral District

LOCATION:

Jacksonville, Florida, United States

Overview

Cathedral Hill (originally known as the “Cathedral District”) is a 36-block, 118-acre district in downtown Jacksonville, Florida named after St. John’s Cathedral on Billy Goat Hill at the centre of the district.

Described in the Cathedral District Master Plan as a “once-vibrant neighbourhood”, the area experienced significant disinvestment during the postwar period, necessitating a redevelopment plan, completed in 2017 by non-profit Cathedral District-Jax, Inc. The ongoing revitalization initiative represents an active multi-denominational and ecumenical effort, which includes existing residents and businesses, to proactively guide the transformation of a downtown residential neighbourhood.

According to the Cathedral District-Jax, Inc.’s State of the District 2022 update report, 300 affordable apartments were under construction or in financing, \$42 million (USD) in capital investment has been attracted to the district, and 120 affordable housing units with underground parking have been completed. As of the update, future planning included the creation of 250 market-rate apartments and several mid- to high-density multiplexes, commercial development, and another 120 affordable housing units also began construction that year.⁵⁷

Significant investment into the revitalization of Cathedral Hill provides ongoing opportunities for smaller churches in the area to sell or lease their underutilized assets – such as empty buildings, parking lots, and excess land – to generate alternative revenue to fund to maintenance and capital costs.

Enabling conditions

While implementation of the Master Plan is creating ongoing opportunities for struggling churches in the district, the capacity of St. John's Cathedral was key in spearheading the initiative.

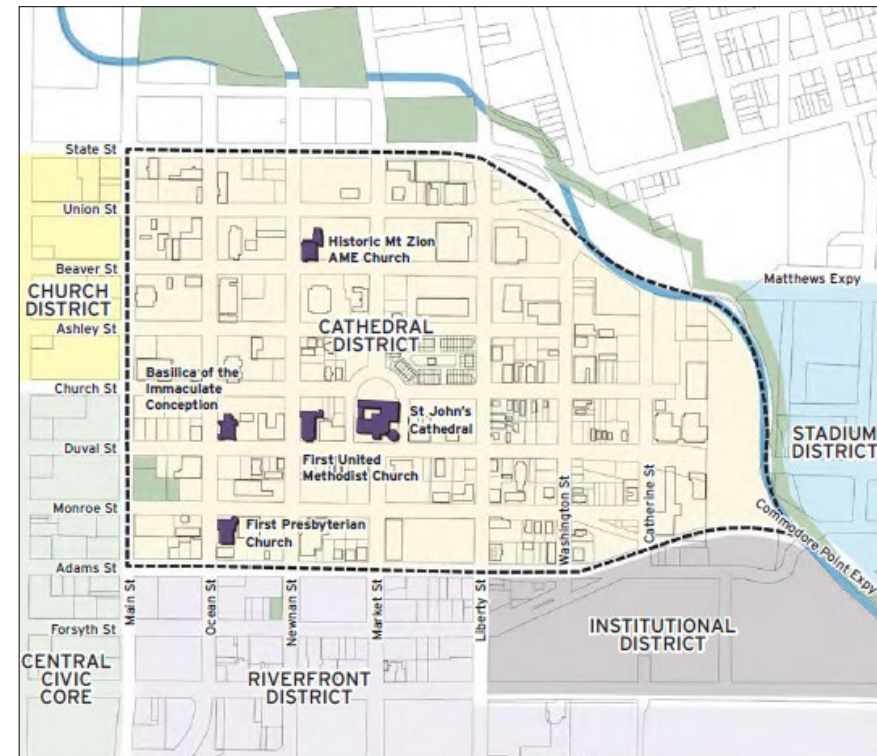
The idea behind the district began in conversations between St. John's Dean Kate Moorehead Carroll and Ginny Myrick, an influential parishioner with experience as a municipal councillor and in economic development, urban renewal, and government relations. Myrick was also a member of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) of North Florida. Together, they recognized a need for action to turn the district around. According to Moorehead Carroll, Myrick's leadership was crucial in building the coalition required to bring the

district from idea to reality and was willing to leave her existing position to become the Executive Director of Cathedral District-Jax Inc. (CDJ), a non-profit formed to create the Master Plan and oversee its implementation.

At the beginning of 2016, St. John's Cathedral engaged ULI North Florida District Council to convene a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP), an intensive two-day workshop assembling ULI members with expertise in development, neighbourhood planning, and urban design. The purpose of the TAP was to identify strategies to address serious economic and social challenges, and drive community revitalization within the neighbourhood around the Cathedral.⁵⁸

Later that year, St. John's Cathedral invited the four other congregations housed within historic churches in the neighbourhood – Mount Zion A.M.E. Church, Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, First United Methodist Church, and First Presbyterian Church – to discuss neighbourhood challenges, each congregation's needs, and their overlapping missions.⁵⁹ Individually, these churches lacked the capacity to engage in planning and development processes on their own. The location of each faith building within the district can be found in Figure A.7.

Figure A.7: Cathedral Commons – Four Development Zones



Source: Cathedral District-JAX, Inc. (2017)

An ecumenical vision for revitalization emerged with the following goals:

- Bring diverse denominations together to work towards the common goal of neighbourhood revitalization.
- Revitalize the Cathedral District so that it becomes a desirable place to live.
- Provide opportunities for congregants to not only serve in the neighbourhood, but also live there.
- Create a safe and pleasant environment.
- Explore how the revitalization process could aid in creating financial support opportunities for the churches and their missions.⁶⁰

The revitalization effort launched with the support of a range of partners beyond the churches, including non-profits, philanthropy, public policy groups, developers, artists, two law firms, and a marketing firm. Further engagement was also conducted with church leaders, political leaders, residents, local business owners, and city officials. CDJ was established with the pro-bono aid of a local law firm, and a philanthropic grant provided funding to launch the development of the Master Plan.⁶¹

Moorehead Carroll describes two models of engagement that worked to support the initiative. Neighbourhood conversations or forums were integrated into the local Christmas festival, which also served as an open house for the churches.

More recently, walking tours of historic buildings and churches have provided opportunities for people to experience these spaces. These efforts were intentional to build a brand for the neighborhood.

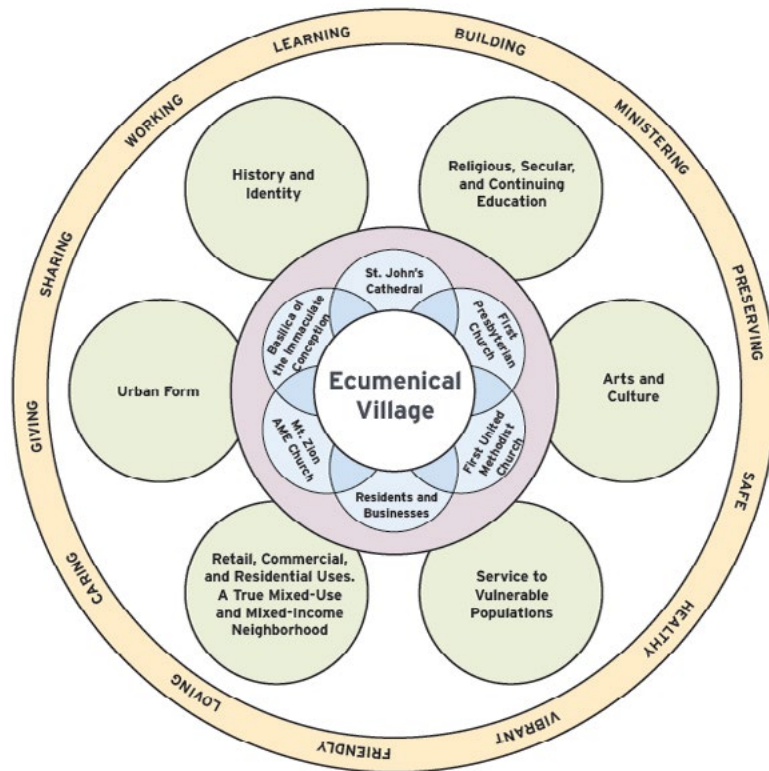
The Master Plan itself is a comprehensive planning document that includes analyses exploring the city and neighbourhood context, previous plans and existing land use, and inventories of vacant and occupied land, parking lots, historical buildings, and open space.

According to Moorehead Carroll, while there was not much attention from the City of Jacksonville at the beginning, once interest hit a critical mass, the City's Downtown Investment Authority (DIA) became an in-kind supporter. The DIA installed banners across the district branding Cathedral Hill,

helping to foster the neighbourhood's renewed identity. The City has helped to create architectural design guidelines and encouraged fines for owners leaving historic properties in disrepair. This makes it financially unviable to sit on property for speculative purposes without ensuring they are habitable, contributing to the vitality of the district. Over the next two years, the City will convert select one-way roads into two-way enhancing the walkability of the neighbourhood.

Civic benefit

Figure A.8: Cathedral District's Ecumenical Model for Neighbourhood Revitalization



Source: Cathedral District-JAX, Inc. (2017)

Inspired by community formation in the European middle ages, the Master Plan's strategy utilizes an "ecumenical model for neighbourhood revitalization", seen below in Figure A.8. The circular model is made up of three sections. The builders and facilitators – the churches, residents, and business – form the centre of the "Ecumenical Village". The six focus areas of village revitalization – History and Identity; Education; Arts and Culture; Service to Vulnerable Populations; Mixed-Use, Mixed-Income, Mixed-Everything; and Urban Form – form the second ring. The outer ring represents, "the living virtues and outward expression of the Ecumenical Village ideals."⁶² This model guides the physical redevelopment and programming of the district.

The Ecumenical Model for Neighbourhood Revitalization also recognizes local residents and business owners, along with the churches, as key builders and facilitators upon which the model centres around. Revitalization efforts continue to be key to attracting investment to develop market-rate and affordable housing options and amenities that would serve congregants and the wider community, especially equity-deserving groups. While the implementation of the model is a work in progress, it builds off services the Cathedral and four churches already provide.



Images credit: Cathedral District-Jax, Inc.

Lessons learned

Skilled and knowledgeable leadership is essential for coalition building

In the context of struggling churches lacking the capacity to navigate complex planning processes and relationships, the identification of a strong and charismatic advocate is necessary to guide the process from idea to reality. It is a significant amount of work, and unless or until there is dedicated funding, will require an individual with the capacity to donate their time and expertise. This individual requires a specific skillset: technical understanding to navigate bureaucracy, soft skills to align interests and secure the buy-in of a range of actors, an understanding of finance, and the ability to clearly communicate.

In the face of changing religiosity, the consolidation of capacity is required

Individual churches in survival mode lack the capacity to lead on their own. Cathedrals, as the seats of authority for regional denominations, are often in a better position to spearhead multi-denomination neighbourhood-level initiatives.

Cathedral District-Jax Inc. provides a governance model for others to take inspiration

The success of the coalition and the formation of a non-profit governance organization, to conduct planning exercises, detail implementation plans, and oversee action, provides a formula for other neighbourhoods. Equivalent organizations could be built in Canadian communities.



CASE STUDY 5: HUD Guide for Faith Based Organizations

PROJECT:

**U.S. Department of Housing and
Urban Development Grantee Guide**

LOCATION:

United States

The HUD Grantee Guide: Working with Faith-Based Organizations on Affordable Housing Development by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development addresses the American housing crisis and supply shortage by providing tools and information to encourage effective collaboration. The guide includes training materials designed to build capacity in affordable housing development and preservation, covering key areas such as the development process, organizational self-assessment, partnership guidance, and template requests for proposals.

Success hinges on collaborative teams with clearly defined roles, strategic partnerships, and adequate funding. The guide identifies that a successful project needs:

Enough funding to get started:

Funding early in the development process is necessary. The guide explores different funding avenues and highlights case studies of faith-based organizations that successfully accessed funding to support their development.

A collaborative environment:

A successful project is usually one that places the faith-based organization in the driver's seat when it relates to defining their role and their goals, to help protect against unethical and predatory developers. Likewise, a strong, trusted, and mission-aligned developer partner is needed to ensure success.


Site control: To avoid project delays and failures, the current landowner of the project where development will occur needs to have documents that prove they have: 1) site control of the property; 2) understanding of the how the real estate ownership will relate to the governance structure of their organization; and 3) awareness of any liens or encumbrances placed on the property (legal claims).

Time commitment: Three to five years is the recommended time needed per project, as development requires an understanding of a longer time commitment that needs to be shared by all partners prior to the start of the project. ³¹

Adapting a version of this guide to the Canadian context could form a roadmap for the adaptation of faith-built assets. Such a document would identify available federal funding programs and could be expanded beyond the provision of affordable housing to include transformation into community hubs and climate resilience centres with a broad mix of uses.



Bourgie Hall, Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, QC

A photograph of a church interior, likely a sanctuary or a large hall, repurposed for a meeting. A long, light-colored wooden table is set up in the center, running parallel to the pews. On the table, there are several stacks of papers, some with diagrams or charts, and several clear glass jars or mason jars, some containing water and others empty. A tall, slender vase filled with white flowers and greenery stands prominently in the middle of the table. The background shows dark wooden pews, a red carpet, and large, colorful stained-glass windows that let in natural light. The overall atmosphere is formal yet inviting.

APPENDIX B: PATHWAYS FORWARD



Additional examples from Canada and the United States are provided for inspiration. Note that the “instigators” listed in each table are potential actors; the list is not definitive.

PRIORITY 1

Quantify the Social Impact

It is widely accepted that Canada is experiencing a wave of church closures, yet the social impact of the loss of this asset portfolio and its impact on communities is not well documented. Stemming the tide in the ongoing loss of social purpose space requires better approaches to data collection and inventory analysis. Knowing the location of faith-built assets, who owns them, what services they provide, and who uses them, in combination with understanding the needs of surrounding communities, is required to inform a nationally coordinated strategy. Reimagining the role of faith-built assets means recognizing them as civic infrastructure for community well-being, similar in importance to libraries, community centres, public, and green spaces.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from open databases at the federal and municipal level, and ongoing work to quantify the socioeconomic benefit that religious congregations contribute to local communities.

Objective: Measure the scope and social impact of faith properties and closure trends, and track potential for adaptive reuse.

Outcome: Clear identification of faith-built assets that offer the greatest potential for adaptation to serve civic needs.

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
1.1	Create a publicly accessible national inventory dataset of faith properties, including their location, type, and ownership status, to be updated regularly.	Statistics Canada Municipal planning departments Faith-based organizations	Statistics Canada's Linkable Open Data Environment (LODE) Municipal open data portals
1.2	Measure the social impact of faith-built assets through socioeconomic and demographic analysis, establishing a foundation for evaluating their contribution to community well-being.	Research organizations Municipal planning and community service departments Faith-based organizations	Halo Project's measurement of the "Halo Effect"—the socioeconomic benefits that religious congregations contribute to local communities

PRIORITY 2

Co-Design Transformation

Faith properties are often located at the centre of communities, on main streets, and in urban areas targeted by municipalities for strategic growth. Building on the historic role of faith properties in the provision of social good requires imagining new civic and cultural functions that can be accommodated in and around these buildings. This will form the foundation of policy and regulatory change with the goal of enabling the transformation of faith properties into multi-purpose community hubs, co-locating community services and facilities, mixed market housing, commercial, and incubator spaces. The opportunities for transformation are as diverse as the actors interested in leveraging them.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from inventory mapping in Montreal, the adaptation

of churches into community centres, public libraries, incubator hubs, and a range of co-located and new uses, and the need for multi-sectoral collaboration. Actions supporting Truth and Reconciliation are inspired by ongoing work to identify the obligations borne of religious colonial land acquisition and how faith-built assets can evolve to support the resurgence of Indigenous Peoples. The last action proposes new educational relationships to teach historic restoration in support of faith-built asset adaptation.

Objective: Reimagine the role of faith-built assets as dynamic, multi-purpose community hubs.

Outcome: Shift in public perception of the role of faith properties in evolving neighbourhoods and communities.

Priority 2: Co-Design Transformation

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
2.1	Identify strategic opportunity sites to direct investment for maximum civic benefit, such as faith properties located on or near main streets, major transit station areas, and downtowns.	<p>Municipal planning and community service departments</p> <p>Faith-based organizations</p> <p>Economic development agencies</p>	Case Study 1: Relèven's mapping of addresses and financial data of places of worship for the Montreal Round Table on the Transition of Religious Property (QC)

Priority 2: Co-Design Transformation

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
2.2	<p>Consider the potential of faith properties to accommodate a variety of uses and functions, including but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • community services • supportive and affordable housing • climate resilience centres (e.g. extreme weather shelter) • meeting and co-working space • community space • skills development, entrepreneurial (business incubators), and cultural supports • pop-up events and markets • commercial kitchens • recreational and cultural activities • continued worship. 	<p>Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC) Environment Canada</p> <p>Municipal planning and community service departments Universities</p> <p>Faith-based organizations</p> <p>Property owners</p> <p>Social impact investors</p> <p>Non-profit and private sector developers</p> <p>Economic development agencies</p> <p>Business improvement associations</p>	<p>The Maison de la littérature in the former Wesley Temple (Quebec City, QC)</p> <p>Ville de Québec's conversion of the St. Denys-du-Plateau Church into the Bibliothèque Monique-Corriveau and community centre (Quebec City, QC)</p> <p>Vertige Escalade's transformation of the Église Christ-Roi church into a climbing gym (Sherbrooke, QC)</p>

Priority 2: Co-Design Transformation

#	Action	Examples	
2.2	<i>continued</i>	<p>The conversion of Calvary Evangelical Church into the Artesian, a multipurpose arts space (Regina, SK)</p> <p>Adaptive reuse of First Phoenix First Baptist Church into meeting spaces with a public courtyard, restaurant, and artist studios: The Abbey PHX (Phoenix, AZ, US)</p>	<p>St. Joseph's Church's conversion into Le Salon 1861, an entrepreneurial hub, full-service event hall, and restaurant (Montreal, QC)</p> <p>Carleton University's adaptive reuse of the downtown Dominion-Chalmers United Church into its Arts, Performance and Learning Centre (Ottawa, ON)</p> <p>The replacement of St. Monica's with a modern faith building within a larger residential redevelopment (Toronto, ON)</p>

Priority 2: Co-Design Transformation

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
2.3	Facilitate collaboration between municipalities and faith-based organizations to establish ongoing working relationships and co-design planning policies, land use plans, zoning by-laws, strategies, and community service programming affecting faith properties, and to leverage available assets for municipal strategic objectives.	Municipal planning, heritage, and community service departments Faith-based organizations Engagement consultants	Case Study 3: Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' early and ongoing engagement with the City of Victoria to rezone the site of Christ Church Cathedral (Victoria, BC)
2.4	Co-design of faith-built asset adaptation with impacted Indigenous communities , including development concepts, scenarios, and programming for the purpose of creating dedicated space for Indigenous-led cultural, spiritual, and economic uses.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Indigenous organizations and communities	Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre's permanent, survivor-driven exhibition, Reclaiming Shingwauk Hall, in a former Residential School building (Sault Ste. Marie, ON)

Priority 2: Co-Design Transformation

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
2.5	Comply with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and duty to consult Indigenous communities to guide faith property adaptation and identify tangible initiatives to incorporate reparation, to advance reconciliation.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Engagement consultants	Case Study 3: Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' historical site research on the impacts of colonial religious land acquisition (Victoria, BC) Stirling Mennonite Church has committed to Land Justice Payments to Six Nations (Kitchener, ON)
2.6	Partner with trade schools and professional trades associations to teach historic restoration and upgrades to historic structures, using heritage faith buildings as laboratories and apprenticeship opportunities.	Trade schools Professional trade associations Faith-based organizations Heritage conservation professionals	--

PRIORITY 3

Build Enabling Frameworks

Pursuing faith-built asset adaptation is complex and involves an entangled web of relationships and varied interests within and between diverse organizations (both faith-based and secular), government policy and regulation, feasibility assessment, financing options, and planning and development processes. There is a need for a Canada-wide community of practice, with regional clusters, consisting of property owners, faith-based organizations, planning and development experts, non-profits, secular community-based organizations, philanthropic foundations, social impact investors, post-secondary institutions, and governments.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from the community benefits achieved when faith-based organizations and property owners access expertise and resources to facilitate faith-built asset adaptation, along with promising planning regulatory reform and tools. The last action proposes the exploration of land title transfers and leases for public goods activation.

Objective: Establish the necessary coalitions to enable adaptation and transformation and highlight inspiring examples and effective frameworks for navigating diverse interests, coalition building, governance, funding, and revenue generation.

Outcome: A strong network of partners and resources supporting faith-built asset adaptation across Canada.

Priority 3: **Building Enabling Frameworks**

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
3.1	Establish a national network , organized into regional clusters, of practitioners and actors, to support knowledge mobilization, multi-sectoral partnerships, and coalition building.	Heritage Canada Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) National professional associations Regional economic development agencies Regional economic development agencies	CMHC's Expert Community on Housing Urban Land Institute's Technical Assistance Panels
3.2	Publish a faith-built asset adaptation guidebook laying out a roadmap for identifying and securing funding sources and navigating faith property adaptation, from engagement and coalition building to planning, redevelopment, governance, property management, and securing community benefits.	Heritage Canada CMHC Provincial legislators	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Grantee Guide for faith-based organizations developing affordable housing

Priority 3: Building Enabling Frameworks

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
3.3	<p>Amend municipal land use policies and zoning by-laws for greater flexibility to enable the introduction of revenue-generating uses and streamline planning approvals for faith property adaptation, by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • permitting additional residential, commercial, institutional uses, and a greater mix of uses as-of-right to enable co-location of non-institutional uses on faith properties currently limited by zoning for institutional or as places of worship • permitting greater density and massing to enable intensification of sites on main streets and in strategic growth areas • eliminating parking minimums. 	Municipal planning departments in discussion with planning and development professionals, and communities	<p>Case Study 3: Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' Building for the Future master plan and rezoning application (Victoria, BC)</p> <p>Case Study 4: Cathedral District Master Plan implementation (Jacksonville, FL, US) City of Barrie's new draft Zoning By-law, reclassifies places of worship as "flex buildings" in Community Hub Zones, allowing for additional uses and integration into mid-rise and high-rise redevelopment (ON)</p>

Priority 3: **Building Enabling Frameworks**

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
3.4	Implement municipal policy area or zoning overlays to allow for density bonusing, transfer of development rights, and/or sale of air rights for faith-built adaptation projects and adjacent public or private development projects where existing community uses are retained and/or enhanced to encourage the preservation of faith buildings without restricting neighbourhood evolution or intensification.	Municipal planning departments in discussion with faith-based organizations, property owners, and communities	Washington State's Law HB1377 allowing municipalities to provide a density bonus for affordable housing development on church-owned properties (US)
3.5	Explore alternate tenure models such as a municipal program to enable the transfer of title for faith properties or long-term lease agreements to a municipality for public use, sale, or sublease with requirements on title or lease for public goods activation.	Property owners Municipalities Non-profit organizations Service providers	Municipal planning

PRIORITY 4

Secure Resources

Many faith-built asset owners face challenges with funding the maintenance of their buildings, and require alternative revenue sources that can be secured through redevelopment. But building the capacity to pursue adaptation requires significant up-front funding, which presents the greatest hurdle to transforming faith-built assets. Adaptation requires major feasibility studies involving assessment of properties, buildings, and space; multi-sectoral consultation and engagement; and servicing and impact studies. This all requires funding to recruit expertise and build capacity to navigate pre-development, planning and approvals, construction, and property management.

Actions within this priority take inspiration from the stacking of public, private, and philanthropic funding to develop affordable housing on faith properties, the adoption of portfolio management approaches by denominations with large real estate holdings, and the use of joint venture partnerships to consolidate expertise and share risk. In response to the major hurdle of financing land acquisition and adaptation, examples of social purpose governance and financing mechanisms, such as community land trusts and community bond campaigns, provide inspiration for neighbourhood coalitions interested in securing underutilized faith-built assets for their communities. Emergent climate tools such as greenhouse gas emissions calculators and a range of public energy efficiency programs are promising tools identify and action opportunities to keep faith buildings out of landfills.

Objective: Secure funding and resources to enable long-term community-oriented adaptation of faith-built assets.

Outcome: Adaptation is financially sustainable, ensuring that faith-built assets can continue to serve communities into the future or are replaced through community benefits

Priority 4: **Secure Resources**

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
4.1	Identify funding opportunities from federal, provincial, municipal, private sector, philanthropic, and social impact investors for faith-built asset adaptation projects.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Developers Funders	Case Study 2: UWCRC 2.0 navigating access to a range of public and social impact financing to subsidize rental apartments for All Saints' West Broadway Commons (Winnipeg, MB)

Priority 4: Secure Resources

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
4.2	Adopt portfolio management approaches for conducting faith-built asset inventory analyses to identify key redevelopment opportunity sites, consolidate services, and sell underperforming and failing assets to fund the maintenance, upgrades, adaptation, and programming of other strategic assets within a faith-based organizational portfolio.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Real estate portfolio managers	Case Study 3: Anglican Diocese of Islands and Inlets' portfolio approach to real estate management (BC) The Archdiocese of Montreal launched the Corporation Immobilière Catholique Romaine de Montréal, a non-profit to manage Catholic properties (Montreal, QC)
4.3	Secure alternative revenue for faith building maintenance, upgrades, and adaptive reuse by introducing new uses in the redevelopment of underutilized faith-built assets.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Developers Economic development agencies Community organizations	Case Study 2: All Saints' use of residential and commercial rent revenue from West Broadway Commons to fund maintenance and upgrades for their historic church (Winnipeg, MB)

Priority 4: Secure Resources

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
4.4	Leverage joint venture partnerships to share expertise and risk in faith-built asset adaptation.	Faith-based organizations Property owners Developers Community development corporations	Case Study 2: All Saints and UWCRC 2.0's joint venture, mixed market housing development for West Broadway Commons (Winnipeg, MB)
4.5	Utilize social purpose governance and financing options such as community land trusts and community bonds to fund faith-built asset acquisition and adaptation.	Community-based organizations Social impact investors Faith-based organizations	Kensington Market Community Land Trust's community bond campaign (Toronto, ON) Brique par brique's community bond campaign to fund housing and a community centre (Montreal, QC)

Priority 4: **Secure Resources**

#	Action	Instigators	Examples
4.6	Utilize emerging climate tools , such as greenhouse gas emissions calculators, to quantify the financial and climate costs and benefits of faith building versus demolition, informing public funding programs, and municipal incentives designed to keep building materials out of landfills.	Environment Canada Municipal climate departments Property owners Developers Heritage and adaptive reuse experts	-
4.7	Identify and apply existing building energy efficiency programs to adaptation projects , such as energy performance upgrades, recycling of materials, and/or retrofits.	Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC) Municipal climate departments Property owners Developers	Transcona Memorial United Church leveraging HICC's Green and Inclusive Community Buildings Program to improve building energy performance through heating, lighting, and insulation upgrades, in addition to adding rooftop solar panels (Winnipeg, MB)

APPENDIX C: ENDNOTES



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- 20 Source: 2022 T-3010 Data.
Methodology: Based on the total land and building value of churches in New Brunswick for 2022 (\$480,411,875) and the Government of New Brunswick's reported total property tax relief figure for churches in the same year (\$17,756,563), CUI calculated an implicit property tax relief rate of approximately 3.70%. This rate was determined by dividing the reported tax relief by the total building value in New Brunswick. CUI applied the 3.70% implicit tax rate to the estimated total building values of all religious organizations in other Canadian provinces. This resulted in the national estimate of \$1,037,395,594.
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