

NEW LIFE FOR OLDER BUILDINGS

Rachel Hildebrandt joined the priest-in-charge of Church of the Crucifixion in the meeting room to discuss the church's future. Hildebrandt works for Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization that provides support for congregations seeking to preserve their historic buildings as they revitalize their mission. As the two discussed this African American church's history and its chances for survival, they heard clanging and water began to fill the room. It sounded as if a water pipe had burst. Weeks later, the church closed its doors, but the Episcopal Diocese of Philadelphia, which held ownership of the building, began planning a new mission for its tiny congregation and the use of the space. The Diocese had no plans to let go of this historic building.¹

Four Possibilities for Transforming Older Buildings

What options do church leaders have when the congregation dwindles and its building falls into disrepair, but demolition of the building would reduce the vitality of the surrounding community? Based on her experience, Hildebrandt outlines four possibilities.

Remain in Place and Acquire Tenants. Many older church buildings, constructed during the religious boom of the 1950s and 1960s, have ample space and are underutilized. Sharing space with tenants can put the building to use and reconnect the church to the community. Whether receiving single or multiple tenants, first consider the building's usability and how much it might cost to bring it up to par. Starting with a building that is already clean, safe, water-tight, and accessible is a definite plus. It's important to designate a volunteer or staff person to respond to space requests as well as manage the space, and to stress to the congregation the value of being flexible and adjusting its activities to accommodate tenants. A caveat: space sharing does not necessarily lead to

membership growth, and it does not function as a panacea for building or financial problems. However, if understood as a ministry of hospitality and a way to connect with the community, space sharing is an excellent way to generate income, which allows the congregation to focus on mission, not simply financial survival. Two other possibilities in this scenario include developing a partnership between multiple congregations and selling non-essential assets such as parsonages, unneeded parking, stained glass windows, and art or artifacts.

Restart the Congregation and Change Ownership of the Building. Restarting means allowing the current congregation to die and using its resources to launch an entirely new group with a new name, new leadership, and a new purpose. This approach requires sacrifice, a willingness to let go of control, and acceptance that the future may be radically different than the past. After this, the building may be sold to a real estate developer or a congregation with



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ample resources. In some cases, the church restart may choose to remain in the building, paying rent to the new owner. As an alternative to selling, the judicatory may mothball, or hold in reserve, the church's properties until a new ministry emerges, as the Diocese chose to do with Church of the Crucifixion's building.

Use Financial and Development Incentives to Stay. In some cases, a real estate developer might be willing to partner with a congregation on a development agreement that allows the congregation to remain in place. This might be accomplished through the *transfer of development rights*, defined as "a voluntary, incentive-based program that allows landowners to sell development rights from their land to a developer or other interested party who then can use these rights to increase the density of development at another designated location."² For example, the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration in midtown Manhattan in New York City sold air rights associated with the church building and its adjacent parish house to a housing developer. After demolishing the parish house, the housing developer erected a 54-story, 139-unit condominium tower, earning \$7 million for the congregation and space in the tower for its fellowship hall and gathering spaces.

Another financial incentive is the *ground lease*, which allows the tenant (such as a development company) the right to develop a piece of property during the lease period (often fifty to ninety-nine years) with the land and all improvements reverting back to the congregation afterward. For example, the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston struggled to meet its building upkeep costs, despite having 1,300 worshippers each weekend. To alleviate the problem, the cathedral signed a 99-year ground lease with a for-profit developer, which erected a 160-unit apartment building on the cathedral's parking lot, including ground floor retail space and underground parking. In addition to financial compensation, the developer provides seventy parking spaces to the cathedral.³

Sell the Property for a Civic-Minded Use. In some cases, the congregation may decide it's best to close, merge with another congregation, or move into a smaller, more manageable space. (For insights on how to rent, construct a new building, or buy a vacant building and adapt it, see the *Parish Paper* article, "Is It Time to Relocate?" June 2021). At a minimum, sell-

ing the property involves working with realtors, attorneys, and developers; appraising the property; listing it for sale; evaluating potential buyers; and negotiating a sale agreement. Equally important as managing the logistics is keeping in mind what will support the health of the surrounding community. While demolition might be best for the community in some cases, more often it's better to seek a buyer who supports its renovation and reuse for a new purpose. Such adaptations can serve the community by meeting the need for housing, gathering, and workspaces, among other uses. For example, at Bala Cynwyd United Methodist Church, located in a Philadelphia suburb with the same name, church leaders rejected a consultant's advice to work with a developer to build townhouses on the site. Instead, they opted to sell the property to Mesivta High School of Greater Philadelphia, a small Jewish high school that served a growing Jewish community in Bala Cynwyd.⁴

New Life for Church of the Crucifixion

A year after Church of the Crucifixion's building closed, it opened its doors again. With the help of a group from St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Center City, located a mile away, and with a grant from the Lilly Endowment, a startup ministry emerged. Called RISE, this ministry began holding baking activities for members of the neighborhood. The ministry aimed to build community among 21- to 35-year-old neighbors and alleviate hunger among city residents. The RISE ministry might yet become the bit of yeast needed to develop a new congregation in the building.⁵

1 Rachel Hildebrandt with Joshua Cartano, *Transitioning Older and Historic Sacred Places: Community-Minded Approaches for Congregations and Judicatories* (Philadelphia, PA: Partners for Sacred Places, 2020), 35-45.

2 *Ibid.*, 53.

3 *Ibid.*, 55.

4 *Idid.*, 69.

5 *Ibid.*, 35.