

America's Endangered Historic Urban Houses of Worship

An Overview of a National Epidemic by Partners for Sacred Places

Partners for Sacred Places is the only national, non-sectarian nonprofit organization dedicated to helping congregations and their communities sustain and actively use older and historic sacred places.

Introduction

This white paper focuses on the threats facing historic houses of worship in America's major cities. Endangered by declining membership and increasing maintenance costs, these proud places are both architectural landmarks and homes to crucial social services for their neighborhoods.

This report begins by examining the central place urban houses of worship have occupied in American history, then describes the forces now threatening their survival. It uses case studies from Washington, DC, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, New York, and Seattle to highlight the main issues facing thousands of houses of worship across the United States; each of these examples meets the following criteria:

- 1) it is more than 50 years old and survives with most of its original architectural features intact;
- 2) it has significant deferred maintenance, repair and restoration needs that are beyond the financial means of its congregation;
- 3) it houses an array of vital community service programs;
- 4) its congregation has strong leadership and a vision that reflects the hope and promise of its neighborhood.

The concluding section describes already-existing programs that offer models for keeping these buildings at the heart of American community life.

The Case for Protecting Historic Urban Houses of Worship

Thousands of historic urban houses of worship across the nation – churches, synagogues, temples and mosques – are threatened by years of deferred maintenance, financial disinvestment and, in rare instances, soaring real estate values that make selling the property an attractive proposition for shrinking congregations. Abandoning these buildings would mean losing an irretrievable part of the nation’s cultural heritage that extends from before the Revolutionary War to the modern Civil Rights Movement.

These places do more than protect America’s past – they also provide critical community services to a population that extends far beyond their congregations. Though there is a growing public understanding of the critical roles that faith-based organizations play in the nation’s cultural and social fabric, these groups will be unable to offer social services and safe havens to people in the nation’s most impoverished neighborhoods if their buildings collapse piece by piece or in wholesale demolitions.

Physical deterioration – and band-aid repairs by financially-strapped congregational owners – appears across the country. For urban houses of worship to remain vital parts of their communities, leaders from both the public and private sectors must recognize the value of these places, build community awareness of the issues surrounding their loss, and commit themselves to preserving these buildings and the programs they house. A key part of this effort is money: leaders must be willing to help raise the funds necessary to restore and maintain these properties and to help congregations receive equal access to the same funding streams available to other historic properties. Finally, urban houses of worship will flourish when congregations receive the professional assistance and training that will allow them to manage their properties more effectively.

Architectural Design Builds Community Identity

Churches, synagogues, temples and mosques are often the most ambitious, beloved, and architecturally significant buildings in any given urban neighborhood. Their domes, towers, and spires provide identifying elements in the local skyline, and they attest to the diverse traditions that have created cities and towns across the country.

As wave upon wave of new Americans made and remade the nation’s cities, they invested in their houses of worship. In Colonial days, Christians and Jews proclaimed their freedom to worship through the design of their sanctuaries. Later, in northern cities, freed black men sold themselves back into slavery to help pay for the construction of their churches and to support their own ministers. The best architects and builders of the day – including James Renwick, H.H. Richardson and Ralph Adams Cram – designed these houses of worship, and the finest craftsmen and artisans collaborated to create what are, quite literally, storehouses of American art.

Research Documents Community Contributions

Beyond the obvious sense of place that urban houses of worship contribute, these institutions deliver significant services to the broader community. Starting in the late 19th and early 20th century (in some cases, even earlier), many congregations created multi-functional complexes to provide a wide variety of social, educational, and spiritual programs.

In 1997, *Partners for Sacred Places* released groundbreaking research that established the public value of historic urban sacred places. Conducted in over 100 congregations in six cities, the study demonstrated that over 90% of the nation's historic inner-city houses of worship are "de facto" community centers that provide services to people in need, most of whom are not congregation members.

This research also established that a congregation's ability to provide services depends on its facilities. Over 75% of all congregation-based community services take place in a historic property, emphasizing that these buildings are vital to America's social fabric.

The Urgent Threat in the 21st Century

Unfortunately, demographic changes during the last half of the 20th century have dramatically increased the problems facing urban houses of worship. Suburban flight has contributed to severe declines in membership: by the beginning of this century, congregations that had previously numbered 800 or 1000 were often down to 100 or 200.

The corresponding decline in financial resources has meant that crucial repairs have frequently been postponed, and some buildings have been left untended. Fifty years of deferred maintenance has taken a profound toll: towers are unstable, roofs suffer major leaks, walls bow or lean, masonry lacks pointing, and mechanical systems are seriously outdated and often in violation of newer building codes. More and more congregations are being forced to close or dismantle their buildings piece by piece, or even consider abandoning them altogether; new congregations that take over older buildings also inherit the results of years of neglect.

Another study by *Partners for Sacred Places* showed how great the need has become. It looked at a representative group of 10 historic urban houses of worship in one of the poorest census tracts in North Philadelphia and found that the average congregation faces between \$1 million to \$2 million or repairs, an amount that greatly exceeds its resources.

Similar situations appear across the country. The following case studies document the roles urban houses of worship play in their communities and detail the enormous challenges they face.

Case Studies

Aging Congregation Grapples with Deferred Maintenance Mount Bethel Baptist Church, *Washington, D.C.*

The congregation of Mount Bethel Baptist Church was established by former slaves in 1875. It moved to its current building, originally constructed in 1902 for the Rhode Island Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1958, and is now a key part of Washington's ethnically and economically diverse Bloomingdale neighborhood.

Mount Bethel Baptist has a long history of community outreach and service. It was intimately involved with the Civil Rights movement, particularly the 1963 March on Washington, when busloads of people from across the nation camped out and made placards at the Church. Today, it provides much-needed services to the community: educational and recreational programs for young people, such as year-round tutoring in reading and computers, summer camps, and Boy and Girl Scouts; senior health fairs; and the Self Help and Resource Exchange ("SHARE") food distribution program.

Though demand for these services is growing, Mount Bethel Baptist's aging congregation of less than 250 people is less and less able to maintain their historic building. They need to repair floors, walls, and roofing systems, to upgrade antiquated electrical and plumbing systems, and to maximize the use of existing space without compromising the building's historic and aesthetic qualities.

Chicago "Mother" Church Needs Over \$3 Million in Repairs Quinn Chapel, African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), *Chicago, Illinois*

Its 1847 founding made Quinn Chapel Chicago's first organized African American church. Since then, it has been a beacon to a broad community – advocating the abolition movement, serving as a stop on the underground railroad, being the "mother" church for A.M.E. congregations in Chicago and beyond, and providing educational services to its neighborhood.

Its current building, the third one the congregation has owned, illustrates Quinn Chapel's history. An impressive Romanesque and Gothic Revival structure finished in 1891, it was designed by African American architect Henry Starbuck and constructed by African American contractors and laborers. The sanctuary seats 1500 and houses an impressive pipe organ once part of the German Pavilion in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

The church remains a vital part of its community, housing an impressive array of community programs that include daycare, a food distribution center, and clothing closet. It opens its doors to a large number of grassroots community organizations, and also provides English-Spanish translation services. Yet the condition of the building threatens continuation of these programs: the congregation urgently needs \$500,000 to replace a dangerously leaking roof and an additional \$3 million to repair water damage, replace the boiler, and make exterior repairs.

**"New" Building Owners Struggle to Repair Collapsing Towers
Acts of the Apostles Church in Jesus Christ, *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania***

This grand 1902 Gothic Revival building, originally designed by George Lovatt for a German Catholic parish, was acquired by the Acts of the Apostles Church in 1976. It was the first time another congregation had purchased a church owned by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

The church sits in the historic Brewerytown neighborhood, an area hard hit by job loss and disinvestment. The congregation responds to the community's needs by sponsoring innovative programming for women emerging from prison and homeless families that includes job training, continuing education, health screenings, family reunification, drug counseling and recreational activities.

Yet the church building that offers these services is in a critical state. Two masonry towers with severe structural problems (primarily due to water infiltration) are close to demolition, which would cost \$500,000 or more; other urgent repairs would require at least \$1 million, far beyond the means of this small congregation.

**Storm Battered Church Provides Home to New Immigrant Communities
St. Joseph's Church, Redemptorist, *Denver, Colorado***

St. Joseph's Catholic Church is an impressive red brick gothic-revival building now listed on the Colorado register of historic places. Constructed in 1889 as a parish church for the Diocese of Denver, it was transferred to the Redemptorist Order five years later. It has served successive waves of new immigrants: Americans of German, Irish, Italian and Central and South American ancestry have all called St. Joseph's home. Today the parish is largely Latino, and mass is celebrated in Spanish and English.

The congregation provides extensive services for the poor and the homeless in its neighborhood and throughout the city of Denver. Every week, its Broadway Assistance program distributes food to more than 200 families and serves hot meals to over 300 homeless people, and St. Joseph's also offers classes in English as a second language. Its former school building houses other programs, charging them minimal fees for the use of space and utilities.

The church has a long list of urgent repair needs. The sky-lights over the altar are close to collapse and a recent storm destroyed another stained glass window. Heavy snow has damaged the gutters and exacerbated leaks in the roof, and a new heating system is needed. Immediate repairs will cost over \$1 million, far beyond the means of a congregation whose weekly donations total only \$2,000 a week.

Losing the American Jewish Immigrant Experience
Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Synagogue, *New York, New York*

Founded in 1852, Beth Hamedrash Hagadol is the oldest Orthodox congregation of Russian Jews in the United States. Since 1885, the congregation has occupied an 1850 Gothic Revival building originally built as a Baptist church. Its place in the community is illustrated by Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, the congregation's leader for 50 years and an internationally recognized scholar. During World War II, Rabbi Oshry was the religious leader of the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania; its inhabitants preserved a hidden archive of the ghetto's history, and this record is currently the core of a major exhibit and companion book at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Beth Hamedrash Hagadol continues to hold three services a day, with 10 or more men at each service, but the membership is aging and dwindling. This decline has made it more difficult for the congregation to continue social programs such as food distribution to the poor and visits to the sick and homebound in the neighborhood.

The challenges are even greater because of the condition of the building. A devastating fire in 2001 resulted in serious damage to the Synagogue's roof and other parts of its structural system. Costs for complete restoration are not yet estimated, but the congregation is struggling to raise matching funds for a \$250,000 New York State historic preservation grant.

Last Downtown Church
First United Methodist Church, *Seattle, Washington*

First United Methodist Church, built in 1907 in the Beaux Arts style, is the last historic church remaining in the city's commercial core. This domed brick and terra cotta building uniquely represents Seattle's maturation from a hardscrabble frontier town to a cultural and commercial center.

The congregation offers several community-based programs, focusing particularly on serving the homeless. Yet the church's location has made its land very valuable, raising questions about whether it will remain a part of downtown. Congregation leaders and preservationists now are collaborating to plan a "design charrette" that will explore alternatives to demolition and determine if preservation of the historic building is feasible.

Challenges, Solutions and Models for Creative Collaborations

New Dollars/New Partners:

Looking for Financial Support Beyond Congregational Members

Traditionally, congregations have relied on their members to fund all aspects of building maintenance and repair. But as congregations in urban areas are faced with escalating repair costs, new resources must be found.

Fortunately, there are examples of historic houses of worship that have raised funds from beyond their members. But this type of "community-wide" fundraising is not widely practiced, as few consultants know how to capitalize on the strengths or advantages of historic houses of worship to reach a broader base.

To help address these problems, *Partners for Sacred Places* created *New Dollars/New Partners* – a program that provides practical help for congregations seeking to broaden and diversify the circles of donors and partners that can support the care and good use of their historic properties.

Training and Support for Property Care and Maintenance

Religious and lay leaders are typically untrained in property management, leaving them poorly equipped to oversee maintenance and preservation; denominational offices are rarely able to offer expertise or resources.

Yet there are exceptions. Programs in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Denver, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Kansas City have offered workshops and/or low-cost professional consultation on a variety of building repair and maintenance issues. Many of these efforts also provide funding or *pro-bono* assistance, enabling congregations to retain qualified architects and other building professionals to assist in planning capital projects.

Models/Resources

FaithAction/Historic Denver, Inc.

Begun in 2000 as a collaboration between the faith and preservation communities, FaithAction is a funded and staffed program of Historic Denver, Inc. It provides workshops on fundraising and property care, and other technical assistance to Denver's historic houses of worship.

New York Landmarks Conservancy's Sacred Sites Program

Since 1986, this innovative program has assisted hundreds of congregations and leveraged significant funding throughout the state. It offers a combination of workshops, specialized publications, one-on-one consulting, and grants for both planning and "bricks-and-mortar" work.

Public and Private Sector Funding

Federal Funding May Increase

Funding for historic properties of any kind is usually complex, and it is even more complicated for religious buildings. Historic religious properties in use by congregations have been largely precluded from federal historic preservation grant programs. However, as of the May 27, 2003 announcement by the White House, funding for the preservation of historic religious properties will now be available under the National Historic Preservation Act. This action makes many structures eligible for federal grants but is unlikely to meet the overwhelming need.

Pattern of Uneven Funding from State Government Historic Preservation Programs

Some states do award preservation grants to historic houses of worship. Funded by appropriation or bond acts, these programs have helped leverage matching funds from the private sector for an array of religious property preservation projects. However, like most preservation programs, they are vulnerable to a poor economic climate and the changing priorities of new administrations.

Model/Resource

State Historical Fund of Colorado Historical Society

The State Historical Fund has grown to be the largest fund of its type in the nation. Since its inception 10 years ago, the Fund has awarded close to \$4.5 million to over 30 historic houses of worship in Denver alone. However, Colorado's grant program is in danger of being dramatically reduced or eliminated due to conflicting priorities and budget constraints, endangering its support of religious buildings.

More Private and Corporate Foundation Resources Needed

Many private, community and corporate foundations do not provide support to religious organizations. In some cases, these funding patterns are based on policies established in corporate by-laws, but in other cases are rooted in habit. Yet many foundations do support the kind of social service programs that congregations offer, many of which depend on crumbling historic houses of worship to give them shelter.

Funders and decision-makers not bound by corporate by-laws have the flexibility to redefine their priorities to include both program and capital support to religious institutions. Even foundations unwilling to give funds directly to congregations can help by enlisting preservation or other community-based non-profit organizations to act as “re-granting” organizations. Such re-grantors may provide both technical assistance and financial support for capital planning and project implementation. Congregations interested in working through re-granting organizations may need legal assistance and technical help to set up separate 501 (c)(3) corporations.

Models/Resources

The Steeple Project of Historic Boston Incorporated

Founded in 1993, this highly-successful re-granting program has raised over \$1 million from fourteen private foundations to help 44 Boston congregations plan and implement the repair and lighting of their historic buildings. Congregations can apply for grants or low-interest loans to conduct a building conditions assessment, make capital repairs, and/or illuminate their building facades.

The Rittenhouse Coalition for the Restoration of Sacred Places, Inc.

This innovative collaborative of three historic churches in downtown Philadelphia has raised over \$500,000 from foundations and government to help restore the windows, roofs and exteriors of all three properties. The congregations established a separate 501 (c)(3) organization to solicit, manage and distribute grant funds awarded for preservation.

Funding from the Religious Community

Although resources within the religious community are very unevenly distributed, many affluent congregations want to help poorer congregations. Religious leaders can promote new models of "Urban-Suburban" or "Large congregation-Small congregation" partnerships, with a specific focus on capital repair funding.

Models/Resources

The Domes Fund, Kansas City, MO

In Kansas City, a Pentecostal congregation housed in a grand former synagogue worked with a local technical assistance organization, *Friends of Sacred Structures*, to reconnect with the former congregational owner of the building, now located in the suburbs. This unusual relationship led to the creation of the Domes Fund, which has drawn the wider Jewish community into a campaign to raise funds to repair the building's landmark twin domes.

Capital-to-Capital Tithing, Philadelphia, PA

In Philadelphia, a large, historic Episcopal church devised an innovative mechanism to support less affluent congregations. It donates 10% of the funds raised in a multi-million dollar capital campaign to two urban Episcopal churches with more limited financial resources; that donation will help restore portions of historic buildings used for community programs.

For more information

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