In a hot real estate market, what happens to old church buildings?

Church leaders, developers, and urban planners face tough questions as they attempt to halt the abandonment and sell-off of centuries-old structures.

by Sara Miller Llana in the January 30, 2019 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) When Drew Sinclair, a Toronto architect, sets out to repurpose a church—a growing niche in his field across the West—he is guided by a teaching found in the Bible.

It is the parable of the talents, which was shared with him by an Anglican bishop whose congregation was wrestling with its own redevelopment.

To Sinclair, a principal of the architectural firm SvN, if dwindling congregants in buildings on prime real estate are unwilling to budge, they may end up burying their possibilities.

“If we keep them as carcasses of themselves, they will fail,” he said. “If we figure out how to make them lively and active and real parts of their communities . . . then they are doing well by their original purpose.”

Church leaders, developers, and urban planners face such questions as they attempt to halt the abandonment and sell-off of centuries-old structures.

Congregations are especially vulnerable in hot real estate markets. In Toronto, many church buildings are now luxury condominiums with units that can fetch a million dollars or more.

The Anglican Archdiocese of Toronto worked with Sinclair’s firm to study 20 churches that have undergone the process of redevelopment and has decided to halt site sales for now.

In the meantime, diocesan congregations such as the Church of St. Mary and St. Martha are grappling with neighborhood changes. In its community, high-rise construction has left many old churches empty. The church rents pews to an evangelical Ghanaian congregation but needs new partners, faith or community providers, to sustain the property.

Developers were eyeing the land for condos, an idea that some congregants entertained. They instead contracted to envision possibilities for the future: what the religious demographics might look like in their own community but also among newcomers, thinking in ways “churches usually don’t think,” Sinclair said.

To him these conversations are the hardest aspect of redevelopment, well before the technical challenges of converting a church begin. A year after discussions began, the church still doesn’t have a specific vision—except it won’t turn into housing.

For Catholic churches, the Vatican is working on a global standard for how to manage the sale of deconsecrated buildings so that they can be used for community purposes rather than commercial ones.

In the Netherlands, for example, a third of the country’s 1,600 Catholic churches are expected to fall out of religious use in the next decade. In Canada, one-fifth of Catholic churches have been deconsecrated since 2000 amid a drop in attendance. Fifty years ago in Quebec, some 80 percent of people attended mass; 10 percent do today, said Paul-André Durocher, the archbishop of Gatineau.

“Many villages are becoming ghost towns, and they can’t afford the upkeep of big stone buildings, especially when you consider what our harsh Canadian winters can do to them,” he said. “The reality is that we have too many churches.”

The Vatican convened its first-ever conference on the issue in November, titled “Doesn’t God Live Here Anymore?” Pope Francis acknowledged a decline in the number of faithful but said that deconsecrated churches could be given “a new life,” preferably in service to the poor.

The church wants to hold on to a building not for the sake of nostalgia but as an intentional choice not to “surrender to the power of capitalism,” said David Deane, an associate professor of Catholicism and moral theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Selling off churches to the highest bidder fails to account for trends that could reverse themselves over time, Deane said. Even if people aren't churchgoing today, they could be in the next century. To start, immigration is changing religious makeups. Whether Poles in Britain or Latin Americans in the United States, newcomers have revitalized older houses of worship.

"We have very short memories," he said. "We assume that the second half of the 20th century, from 1930 on, was a world in which everyone goes to church, and that it was always this way."

That is wrong, said Deane, who also pointed to the anchoring role churches often play in communities, serving people beyond their congregations.

"And to see that hub getting blown up again in favor of the inexorable flow of capitalist power," he said, "can also destabilize and hurt the whole community."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Church leaders, planners try to manage fate of deconsecrated buildings."