



Community Discussions around the closing and repurposing of Church property

Introduction

While not meant to be definitive or provide a final authoritative position, this monograph hopes to provide a foundation for any discussions in relating to the closing of ministries, buildings, and administration. Its intent is to aid a healthy development of the perceptions of people who are involved including ecclesiastical or secular persons or bodies.

There are a number of societal factors that lead to the closing of Church buildings, and/or the apparent abandonment of older cemeteries. Suffice it to say that cemeteries may suffer from lack of maintenance when there is no longer a living connection by memory to those who have died. When parish resources are insufficient to maintain older cemeteries, ones that are in current use will require any funds available.

It is not widely understood that all real property as described above actually belongs to the Diocese as a whole. In this article, reference to buildings includes rectories, congregational or parish halls, churches or any property that belongs to the Diocese of Central Newfoundland. When a congregation decides to end ongoing worship and any building closes, all assets and liabilities are the legal property and responsibility of the Diocese. The Synod administration is tasked with ensuring the well-being and protection of the Church as a whole.

When Church owned properties are closed the diocese prepares for a variety of responses. No two or experiences or reactions are the same, but there is a commonality that can be illustrated.

1. Community Responses
2. Grief around the end of a ministry
3. Grief around the closing of a building or buildings.
4. Complications of Interpretation from within the Church community and the larger community.
5. Misplaced sense of ownership.

Community Response

Not every congregation reaches a decision to close a building or end a ministry in the same way. Factors that affect congregational life might include changes in local population, the death of devoted Church members, decline in the number of committed contributors. It might simply be a matter of a cultural indifference where no one cares about the health of a worshipping community.

Some people contribute because they care about buildings. When these people are no longer contributing, a congregation that was in a spiritual decline is ill prepared to deal with infrastructure challenges. Congregations who are engaged in discussions about the mission of the Church tend to find it easier to move through the end of ministry processes.

We have discovered that community response correlates to the size and age of a building, community history and community context.

There are times when a ministry ends there is a quiet closure. A formal deconsecration may be held, and processes of selling or dismantling buildings proceeds. Usually by this time the community has become small, and there is a unified voice. By contrast, if there is a perception that the building is of historic value, the secular community will often give voice to concerns about preserving the property. More will be said about that in this document.

Grief around the End of a Ministry

In our Diocese we see people expressing sorrow when they realize that a congregation is reaching the point where it is no longer sustainable. These people have valiantly tried to remain cheerful and optimistic. They have been facing huge challenges of maintaining buildings, paying bills, contributing to the well-being of the parish and Diocese, and providing outreach to those in need. They may be in a community where population decline has affected their attendance, or in a place where people simply do not support the local Church. Often by these times leaders are few and tired; buildings, cemeteries and other properties are in need of repair or attention. In spite of all this, it is hard to bring things to a close, simply because of a love of the fellowship we treasure as Anglican Christians, and our relationship with God through Word and Sacrament.

Grief around a building

Another very real grief comes when people consider the “real property” of a community of faith. Many people are able to express their devotion and share their gifts through caring for the buildings, halls, rectories, cemeteries and so on, that make up the outward and visible signs of our devotion and commitment. Many of our people sacrifice much to maintain our structures, and feel demoralized when others do not respond to pleas for help. Often, those who have given so much without community support will feel deeply wounded and even angry with the speedy voicings of uninformed opinions from a society who only now seem to be concerned.

Varied Interpretations and Conclusions when Buildings Close

Before considering secular community understandings around Church property, it must be acknowledged that even within Church culture there is a wide variety of interpretations concerning the value of buildings and the definition of community. In other words, even within congregations and parishes, differences of opinions and understandings are not unusual. In all cases, we recognize the importance and worth of each conclusion, and work to create unity and respect in all discussions and decisions.

People have different views of what it means to be a member of a faith community. For some the word “Church” refers to a New Testament understanding that the Church is a gathering of like-minded people. In that case, there is sense of being part of an organic community that changes, grows or dissipates. Christians understand such action as the moving of the Holy Spirit, and trust that they are being led through times of change.

For others, an institutional understanding of Christianity has formed their values. In the not so distant past, active Church leaders were also the leaders of government, education, economics, and professional community leaders. For these people, structures, doctrines, expectations, and processes are main consideration.

Often intertwined with community and Church culture is an understanding of “Cultural Christianity”. This would include those who superficially identify as Christian, but are not part of a regular worshipping community. In our experience there are many who have not been part of a congregation in any active sense, and as such have a diminished understanding of the values and traditions of a faith community, but have formed their own ideas and expectations of what a Church should be, or be doing. Generally, these people do not contribute their time or finances to local Churches, but due to family background and upbringing, tradition, memories or social environment, would consider themselves to still be a member of a Church or denomination.

It should be understood that within each context mentioned here, there are many more layers of experiences and persuasions. If so, it is clear how complications of interpretation from within the Church community and of the larger community can cause division. Our hope is that mutual respect of diverse opinions will build rather than damage community in times of change.

Misplaced Sense of Ownership

When an announcement is made that a property considered to have historical significance is closing there may be some public response. By and large we have seen a public indifference to Church closures. However, when property is perceived to be at risk the public response is usually vigorous and diverse.

The emerging challenge lies in bringing all diverse experiences, values, opinions and minds together. Often in communities where other underlying social conflicts exist, the conversation around the closing of a Church property may be complicated by a history that has little to do with the situation, even though some of the negative energy may have affected the health of a congregation over past years.

There are some who will see a Church closing as a “failure” of sorts. Others will see it as a natural end to an organic community. Some will feel that buildings, having served their purpose faithfully and well as both symbol and gathering place, should be respectfully dismantled and removed from the physical and social landscape. They may be grieving the years of indifference from the public.

Others will act upon convictions that historic properties must be preserved because their loss would be tragic. They simply cannot understand how anyone could stand to see a building taken down. “ Surely these buildings must be restored or re purposed”.

Both views are important and valid. It is to that concern that I now turn.

The Purpose of Holy Buildings and Furnishings

No one would contest that there is a strong correlation between religious beliefs, objects of worship, buildings and culture. This relationship is obvious in the construction of sacred buildings through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The building of Churches in Newfoundland was both an art form and a belief system. In most communities Churches would be built on the highest point of land as a symbolic declaration that nothing in a community stood above God, or service to the Church. Towers and furnishings, stained glass, bells, altars, lecterns and communion vessels were constructed at great costs of time and money. Because these items were directly connected to understandings of the Mission of the Church and expressions of Worship they were set aside for the single purpose of enabling people to come closer to the Divine presence of God.

Churches were among the most magnificent buildings in communities and deliberately represented a division between secular and sacred space. To cross the threshold of a Church was to respectfully enter a sacred space and time where a journey from a secular to the sacred world was possible. The liturgy celebrated inside these consecrated buildings marked sacred time that affirmed the Christian belief in the historicity of the person of Christ, and the intervention of God in human history.

It is important to see how the terms “consecrated”, “set aside”, “Holy”, “dedicated” do not apply to secular use of consecrated buildings. By extension, the craftsperson who built the church and furnished or crafted the items within them, and the people who used it from generation to generation were well aware of what the building and accoutrements represented. Christianity attaches great importance to symbols so our buildings, regardless of what they may be repurposed for, will always remain a visual metaphor of Christian life and devotion. Repurposing must be done with great care and respect.

There are two terms that are essential in order to help this conversation.

Text and Context There are two layers to this definition. First, “text “would be that which describes an article itself. The description would be about the item (building or otherwise) made for a specific purpose.

Context The context is then considered by observation, questions, and conversations concerning both its manufacture, purpose and history of use. This is a perpetual and ongoing “text” which tells the story of why it was it made, how it was it made, who used it, how it was used, where did the materials come from, who designed it, how were lives affected by it and so on.

Material Culture A general description of material culture refers to the physical objects, spaces, and settings that people use to define and connect to their culture. Some of these items lose their meaning when repurposed.

Understanding Church Property as an Ongoing Text

It must be remembered that a Church building will always be a visible reminder of a past faith community whether it is left empty or repurposed. The building will perpetually speak of a relationship between the past and present and cast a reflection upon images of the worshipping community, the practice of liturgy, and the vibrancy of the Christian Faith.

When a faith community reaches the end of a journey, buildings may become a focal point on different levels. When Churches are no longer maintainable or serviceable, the building becomes a strong symbol of past experiences, interactions, values, language, history and faith.

Regardless of who owns it or how it is repurposed, the building becomes a text. Some read the text and determine the importance of a building as a “historical” treasure. Others, see closed and repurposed church buildings as a liability to the ongoing life and witness of the larger church, and a symbol of local failure.

Understanding the Value of Material Culture

We recognize the value of “material culture”. Material Culture is a term broadly used by folklorists, to describe handmade goods, furniture, tools, clothing, quilts, decorative knitting, and so on. Handmade items are important because in the past if you wanted something it had to be crafted by hand. Hand crafted items reveal the qualities and stories of a time past. By contrast today, most goods in our lives come from commercial rather than social processes, and because they are not as difficult to procure, the value of modern things like furniture, tools, and clothing are lessened and have little to teach. There is no argument that historic buildings are of great importance for preserving the past, however we assert that distorted views of “material culture” will damage the true nature of the original intent. That is a deep concern when considering sacred buildings, contents and Christian identity.

Some Considerations and Conclusions

The Diocese bears a heavy responsibility around ministry and buildings. Guidelines and expectations are in place for the good of every congregation, parish, clergy and people. When building close, someone else has to pay the bills. Legal questions, liability concerns, environmental issues are all transferred to the Diocese. We also have the responsibility of ensuring the original intent of our buildings as centers of worship are preserved. As such, the underlying questions that the owners of our buildings, (namely the Diocese of Central Newfoundland), must ask is:

- “What will be preserved of the original intent of the building or property if it has been repurposed?”
- “What will be lost of the original intent of the building or property if the building is repurposed?”
- “What will be lost if the building is dismantled?”
- The impact the Church building has on the physical landscape if: (a) it is maintained in pristine condition, or (b) allowed to fall into disrepair.
- What are the Liability issues concerning the property? If the building and land is given or sold to another party, the liability is a non-issue. However, if for any reason Church land is leased and NOT sold i.e. (cemeteries or bodies buried within proximity of the building) a minimum requirement must follow:
 - (a) There must be insurance carried on the land and building which protects the diocese completely from all insurance claims, lawsuits or any legal action.
 - (b) There must be an agreement that if in the opinion of the Diocese, the buildings in question, are not being maintained to a standard which values the Institutional Culture of the Church, the building is to be respectfully dismantled at the request of the diocese. Prior to any agreement, the lessee or purchaser must agree to have proof that funds have been set aside to do so.
 - (c) Any item in the building that is specifically designed, dedicated or donated for the ministry of the Church, may not be included with any sale or any land lease agreements.

These questions and conditions are not meant to be definitive and this document is meant to be used as a discussion aid in conjunction with other Diocesan policies.

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