

Properties of Religious Communities Challenges and Opportunities

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Do not remove an ancient landmark or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you. (Proverbs, the 23rd chapter)

Downtown Portland and its inner neighborhoods offer one of the largest concentrations of religious properties – close-in – of any West Coast city. Portland is remarkable for this. These downtown churches especially are of monumental character and architectural significance. Their present buildings date from the early 1880's into the mid-1950's. They represent major architectural modes from High Victorian, Richardsonian Romanesque, neoclassical, Gothic, Art Deco and Midcentury Modern . Several are listed on the National Register of Historic Places; some are listed on the local register. They are ornaments to the city and a visual textbook of high style architecture. They provide not only regular worship opportunities, but offer cultural and musical events, art exhibits, meeting spaces for other non-profits; some offer child- and daycare; others either support or are directly involved in emergency assistance to distressed downtown populations. In many ways they are on the visible front lines of the city's issues with homelessness, low-income housing, drug and alcohol abuse, street crime, and mental illness. Despite membership statistics which are significantly lower than those of two generations ago, maintenance and program needs are funded by regular stewardship and by supplementary resources such as endowments, parking structures and other income-generating ministries.

Of equal significance in their own way as well are the neighborhood churches. Just under half of the 40 churches listed in the URM survey serve ethnic communities (Hispanic, African-American, Chinese, Samoan) in NE and SE Portland. A survey of the websites available reveals that they function as vital community centers for immigrant and refugee populations, offer tailored social service programs, childcare, foodbank and emergency assistance. They are congregations with generally small membership, challenged to meet even regular operating and maintenance costs. But they have profound understandings of the demands of ministry and outreach in their neighborhood contexts.

Anecdotally, everyone suspects that most congregations host daycare centers, soup kitchens, overnight shelters, scout meetings, AA and ALANON programs, but the total scope of these programs is little understood: especially, perhaps,

in Portland, which has statistically led the nation in terms of its “unchurched” or “unaffiliated” populations. Portland churches -- downtown and neighborhood -- carry a major part of the city’s social and human service demands, even if less than 20% of the city’s population is specifically church-affiliated. It is part of the commitment many churches share as both their ministry and their response to the “public benefit” which qualifies them for exemption from property taxes.

Regular property and building maintenance is normally a challenge. Many struggle to conform to access requirements – elevators, ramps and adequate restroom facilities are challenges. Liturgical patterns and programmatic demands bring challenges for which their structures were not originally designed. Security issues are constant. Utility and code updates are regular and often costly needs.

The mandate for seismic retrofit and the URM class 2 designation for most of these properties will commit these religious communities to large-scale investment in order to continue their ministries and their presence in the community. It is a mandate that seeks on the one hand to alleviate the liabilities of the URM structures in which they operate, but it is also an ethical mandate to ensure the safety of those who look to religious communities for safety and support in times of crisis.

Challenges

Many individual religious properties consist of several structural elements of different periods, different materials and a variety of construction techniques. Planning for structural engineering analysis and developing strategies for retrofit is a challenge for engineers and architects.

Retrofit involves removal of hazardous materials, notably asbestos and lead paint. It is difficult to phase this repair and removal and still have the building occupied. Most buildings will have to be partially or totally vacated during the construction period.

Special technical treatment is involved for musical instruments (pipe organs, especially); artwork, sculpture, stained glass, special architectural furnishings (pews, altar, pulpits, organ cases). Many or most of these items have to be removed from the building or otherwise protected and secured during the retrofit construction period. Removal and conservation of the stained glass windows of St. Michael Catholic Church, Portland, is estimated to cost \$600,000. Removal and restoration of the pipe organ at St. James Lutheran,

Portland, is estimated to cost about \$300,000, exclusive of temporary storage costs. Sound systems, speakers and other mechanical systems must be secured, then re-installed and calibrated.

What happens to the religious community-sponsored human services, daycares, other community resources when all churches are required simultaneously retrofit? How does the City absorb the feeding programs, food banks, overnight shelters, clinics and emergency services currently provided by these religious groups? Has there been a city analysis of human services specifically provided by churches throughout the city to understand the impact of a retrofit mandate which would apply to all churches at the same time?

If paid staff members must be laid off during a temporary relocation, the congregation will be responsible for unemployment expenses until the staff can be rehired or find a position elsewhere.

The Catholic Archdiocese estimates that a 10-month absence from a congregational structure results in a 30% membership and plate income loss, some of which cannot be recovered until some considerable time after the structure is again occupied and the ministries resumed under its roof. Some congregants never return.

Some licensed facilities (especially child care and medical clinics) will require temporary certification for spaces occupied while continuing operation away from the congregation's building. Moving back in will require recertification for occupancy. In some cases, presently grandfathered "non-conforming use" may not be retained when the program seeks to move back into the retrofitted building.

Fundraising

Tax credits are generally not useful for religious properties, unless they could be marketed and resold. The TDR options for most congregations, especially in neighborhoods, are not clearly understood or even available, and income generated from this (even if available and marketable) is unlikely sufficient to even partially underwrite seismic retrofit costs.

Mainline church adjudicatories offer little or no financial assistance to local congregations looking to upgrade or engage in proactive repair projects. Some denominations offer church-related low-interest loans, but the sums required – usually in the millions of dollars – are beyond the scope of most church-related agencies. The fund-raising for the post-earthquake repair necessary for St.

Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco, took over fifteen years. That for St. Michael Catholic Church, Portland, has taken seven, and is not yet complete, even as they approach permitting and construction.

Mortgage or bank-financed loans are difficult to obtain from regular financial institutions, especially if congregations are already encumbered with loan obligations.

It is unclear what consequences there will be for insurance rates on religious properties when the ordinance is enacted. Earthquake insurance for religious properties is available from only a few providers. The possibility of a city-wide insurance pool would provide relief from the expense and difficulty of purchasing and maintaining adequate insurance.

Needs

More extended periods for fundraising, structural analysis, planning for temporary relocation of parish staff and programming.

Technical advice: ensuring that accurate and fair engineering and architectural services are available from the very start of a project.

Disaster preparedness (calculated for local resources and to church communities). Only the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon has an online resource for parish-level disaster preparedness.

“Concierge” shepherding through permit and finance processes similar to that proposed in the April 7 Historic Subcommittee policy recommendations

Helpful websites

www.sacredplaces.org –website of Partners for Sacred Places, Philadelphia

PSP, with branches in Texas and Chicago, specializes in linking historic parishes with their neighborhoods and with neighboring congregations for financial assistance planning, assessment of ministries, and technical expertise for construction and fine arts.

A useful congregational resource for disaster preparedness (Episcopal resource – regional and national):

<http://www.diocese-oregon.org/disaster-preparedness-program/>

www.episcopalrelief.org/uploads/EducationFileModel/84/file/ComprehensiveAug2013.doc