**Background**

*Regeneration Works: Places of Faith* is a non-sectarian partnership formed by two national charities, the [National Trust for Canada](http://www.nationaltrust.ca) and [Faith & the Common Good](http://faithandthegood.ca). Together we work to counter the negative impacts to Canadian society that may result from the pending closure of thousands of churches across the country.

We seek to broaden the recognition that these places are community assets. The potential loss of these important physical landmarks also implies a significant risk to the thousands of charitable and non-profit organizations that are housed, or offer their programmes, in their neighbourhood place of faith.

The loss of these places would also be a missed opportunity to build on the incredible potential of these historic assets to contribute to the health and resilience of neighbourhoods by expanding their use to meet contemporary community needs. This can be achieved regardless of their future ownership or whether they continue to house religious worship.

Decisions on the future of thousands of churches are currently being made within the isolation of specific communities and faith groups. And in a legal, financial and public policy context that is founded on the separation of the secular from the sacred, the impacts of these decisions on the common good are often neglected.

In this period of rapid transition of these places from sacred to secular uses, we believe that it is urgent to foster a broader public policy dialogue and to develop the innovative legal and financial measures needed to facilitate positive outcomes for communities.

**The Challenge**

Places of faith anchor and shape our communities. They are prominent physical landmarks and symbols of our collective heritage, and for generations have been gathering places where services and programs have met ever-evolving community needs in addition to their spiritual mission.

Canada is facing a looming crisis with these important community assets, both in small and rural towns as well as urban areas. It is now undeniable that Canadian society is secularizing at a rapid rate and we estimate that the resulting financial impact will force the closure of over 9,000 places of faith in the next 5-10 years. The pace of closure will be more acutely felt in rural Canada where the aging and declining population base cannot sustain these critical community hubs.

Regardless of whether rural or urban, places of faith continue to host numerous charitable, non-profit or community groups, whether it be twelve-step programs, Scouts, the foodbank, a blood donor clinic, arts groups or community meetings. The social fabric of our communities will suffer when these affordable community “third spaces” are lost.

Congregations struggling with declining attendance, decreasing revenues and increasing building expenses, are already overwhelmed by these challenges and are not equipped to lead the efforts needed to revitalize their building and the activities it houses.
National-level faith organizations are making portfolio-wide decisions, often in isolation from the needs of the community, to address their significant financial challenges. Most are offering some level of advisory and financial support to local congregations, yet they can’t keep up with the need.

Property developers and private sector consultant firms that are sensitive to the broader community impact of these properties are rare, and so faith groups are being attracted to solutions that promise a quick financial reward based on a ‘highest and best use’ that may not be in the longer-term best interest of the group or its community.

Because of the important separation that exists in Canadian laws and public policy between secular and sacred objectives, the public perception of this issue is a barrier to addressing its consequences for communities. In a secular society where the historic wrongs perpetuated by religious organizations are well known, it is a challenge to foster a dispassionate, impartial dialogue the on potential of these places to support the common good.

Our Partnership

Over the past 4 years our partnership successfully attracted funding to:
• Offer workshops (full-day and half-day) in 6 cities across the country, reaching over 400 individuals from different faith groups, community organizations, arts and culture groups, heritage advocates, social service agencies;
• Undertake research on successful regeneration strategies for rural places of faith (2017) and the impact of church closures on the not-for-profit sector (2019 – ongoing);
• Provide advisory services to individual congregations on alternative governance models, asset-based community development;
• Produce online resources and offer free webinars.

We believe that places of faith can continue to support strong, diverse, resilient communities – regardless of ownership models or whether worship continues. Proven models exist, and the lessons of their success are transferable.

We recognize that other institutions and organizations are also working to address aspects of this issue, but because these initiatives are often undertaken from within specific faith groups or by private sector interests (developers and consultants), there are perceived by the public and by government agencies as being mostly self-interested and with minimal public benefit.

As two national charities, our objective is to support the transition these places to expanded new uses and ownership models in a manner that minimizes negative impacts and maximize the potential to benefit the common good.

To achieve this, we believe there is a need to act with all involved stakeholders, at many levels, to undertake:
• Research that will inform the public dialogue based on quantifiable data;
• Coalition-Building between faith institutions, governments, private sector and charitable organizations;
• Advocacy for supporting public policy on tax measures and governmental granting programs;
• Training and Resource development to equip congregations and communities.

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1 Statistics Canada and Angus Reid surveys on religious affiliation and church attendance over the past 40 years.

2 Based on unpublished sources from different faith groups and based on the total number of faith-owned buildings as identified in the 2009 NRCan National Survey of Energy Use.