

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: Church Redevelopment: Seeking a Plan

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In August 1980, the United Church's General Council was meeting in Halifax. The new church development unit of the then Division of Mission in Canada had worked over the previous four years to build the case for a major capital appeal to assist with the financing of new congregations across the country. It would be a daring initiative with an ultimate goal of raising several millions of dollars to enable the creation of congregations in neighbourhoods and communities where we had no church presence whatsoever.

The report was brought forward and Moderator George Tuttle called the question on the recommendation to fundraise for our new church development enterprise. Two amendments to the motion were made – both expanding the scope of the fundraising. Amendment one was to include the support of church redevelopment in the appeal for funds. Amendment two added the stabilization of the pre-1955 Pension Fund in the goal. The motion with its two amendments passed and *Ventures in Mission* was given life.

Within weeks of that decision being made, it became clear to the designers of the anticipated campaign that it would be easy to interpret new church development to potential donors. Starting a congregation in a community where there is no United Church is a fairly easy concept to take hold of and run with. And raising money to stabilize pensions is an easy sell – after all, everyone remembers their favourite minister and his or her comfortable retirement is a worthy goal.

But what do you do with a concept like church redevelopment? The fundraisers had before them a term that seemed to be almost indefinable. They interviewed people, held focus groups and worked away at understanding the concept. Sophisticated donors are not likely to contribute to an activity that doesn't have clear objectives associated with it.

Some people thought church redevelopment was the creation of innovative worship, or sending out invitational brochures to the neighbourhood, or doing inventive Christian education with adults and children. But after a closer look, it became clear that these are tasks that every congregation should consider everyday ministry activities. Other respondents put forth the proposal that church redevelopment was a process that would help congregations determine the demographic needs and make-up of the community of which they are a part. Once again the rebuttal was made that any congregation that took its mission seriously

would be anxious to do this task on a very regular basis. And everyone agreed that church redevelopment was not putting dying congregations on a life-support system in order to give them a pulse for a few more months or a few more years.

How exactly could the *Ventures in Mission* campaign literature describe church redevelopment to potential donors? If money was given, what would be the criteria for its spending? How would donors know they were making "a good investment"?

After long hours of conversation and pages of written reports, the following definition was adopted for use in the campaign materials:

Within our faith response to the mandate of the Gospel expressed in love and justice, redevelopment results in a substantial alteration in the direction and style of an existing ministry, or the creation of a new ministry within an existing ministry, to better serve people in a world experiencing racial, cultural, social and technological change.

The dilemma is that with any definition of a concept, there is a need for interpretation. (Just ask the Supreme Court Justices who are called upon regularly to interpret *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.) The debate moved from what is church redevelopment to what is the best way to evaluate applications for funding. What is "a substantial alteration"? What can truly be labeled "a new ministry"? One person's "substantial alteration" is another person's "you should have been doing this years ago". A "new ministry" in one community is "routine experience" in a neighbouring community. One congregation's bold initiative "to better serve people" is another congregation's "everyday response to the Gospel".

It is thirty years later and we're still no closer to getting a handle on the concept of church redevelopment. If anything, managing the whole area of redevelopment has become piecemeal at its best and chaotic at its worst. In some cases, redevelopment is another word for survival. Change is too often sought after, not because "we want to change", but because "we have to change".

Within all of this, however, there are congregations that are being creative and are willing to invest their time, money and future in an enterprise that will change them forever. In some cases, additional external support is needed and investments may be required from the wider church.

Overseeing the investment of church resources in redevelopment activities is a demanding and difficult role. People in every Presbytery and at Conference are named to do this task. They carefully interpret the definition, evaluate applicants' request for support, and, of course, make decisions about the contribution of Presbytery or other funds toward the initiative. They are chastised when they say "no support", questioned when they say "more work is needed", and second-guessed when they decide how much money can and should be given. It's a tough job that requires faithfulness and endurance.

As with any request for grant funds, an application process applies. The purpose is to articulate and identify the redevelopment project. It is often the most important piece of information that an evaluation committee at Presbytery or other courts of the church will have before it. Remembering that church redevelopment has the

potential to take shape in many ways, the detail and the thoroughness of the content of the application will help those asked to interpret the definition and prioritize the use of available funds.

The application, therefore, will need to provide a detailed description of the project, including but not limited to:

- the goals of the redevelopment as set out in a Vision or Mission Statement.
- the history of the shaping of the plan.
- a description of how the redevelopment will substantially redirect the congregation's ministry in light of significant changes in its membership, or in the community to be served, or both.
- the identification of the leadership in the congregation who will stimulate the dynamics needed to enable the congregation to substantially reorient its ministry.
- a timetable for the steps and stages of the redevelopment.
- a budget for the redevelopment including an identification of funding from congregational sources, pledge commitments from members, and potential grants from Presbytery or other external funds.
- a plan for managing and financing the redevelopment after potential grants funds are exhausted.
- identification of the evaluation procedure for the redevelopment.

The evaluation procedure is an important part of this whole partnership and often specifically named in grant agreements. Most funding bodies want to know about a redevelopment experience so they can pass on the knowledge to others. Among the evaluation questions are:

- Were your goals met?
- Where were the redevelopment goals not met and how would you approach meeting the goals if given another chance?
- What have you learned from the initiative?
- How will the results of the initiative be moved forward?
- What is necessary to make this redevelopment transferable to another congregation?

When there is a possibility of obtaining grant funds or low interest loans from Presbytery or Conference for redevelopment activities, congregations are tempted to fit "a round peg in a square hole". And why not when the concept of church redevelopment is so "fluid" and the evaluation of a project is often a "gut reaction that this feels right". This is obviously a place where more work is needed and better guidelines established. Until then, we will move ahead with what we have and thank God that we have people who are willing to step up and help make the tough decisions.

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