

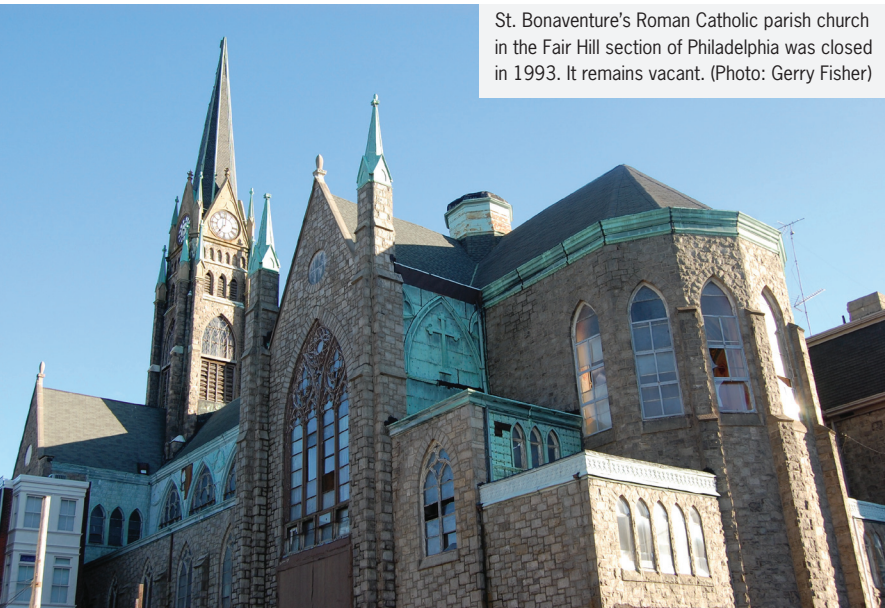
How to Save the Best of Philadelphia's Sacred Places

A. Robert Jaeger

In September 2010, the Philadelphia Historical Commission granted permission for the demolition of the former Church of the Assumption, located in the city's Spring Garden neighborhood. Earlier, the church had been designated as a city landmark for its architectural significance—it was designed in 1848 by Patrick Charles Keely, the most important and prolific architect for the Roman Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century—and for its cultural significance, given its connections to Saints Katherine Drexel and John Neumann.

An engaged neighborhood group, with the support of preservationists and non-profit organizations, organized to save the site, and this past May, the church was granted a reprieve when the Philadelphia Board of Licenses and Inspections voted to sustain an appeal of the demolition. Given that the building faces major repair needs and will not be easily reused, it is unclear what the future holds for this landmark.

St. Bonaventure's Roman Catholic parish church in the Fair Hill section of Philadelphia was closed in 1993. It remains vacant. (Photo: Gerry Fisher)



A COMMON STORY

The story of the Assumption is all too common in Philadelphia, where many other churches – most of them still occupied, but little used and physically declining – face a similar fate in the years to come. A number of former churches are entirely vacant, such as the former St. Boniface, St. Bonaventure, Christ Memorial Reformed Episcopal, and St. Peter's Episcopal churches—and many others are virtually unused, such as Cookman United Methodist. Denominational executives plan to close many more churches in the coming years, so the problem will go from bad to worse.

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The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization whose more than 1,200 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in design, development, and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.

As early as 1998 Partners for Sacred Places' groundbreaking research publication, Sacred Places at Risk (SPAR), documented many of the threats faced by older churches and synagogues: significant deferred maintenance leading to more costly repair needs; shrinking congregations, leading to closures or abandonment; and changing economics and demographics that undermine a congregation's ability to support its building.

At the same time, SPAR documented the myriad benefits that historic congregations provide to their communities, including a variety of social services that are more frequently used by non-members than members, and subsidized by staff and volunteer time, low rent, and in-kind support. Moreover, historic sacred places are highly visible architectural landmarks that anchor their neighborhoods. They are often the finest work of America's architects, and are significant for their historical associations as well.

Partners estimates that for every historic church that stands empty today, five to ten are teetering on the brink of abandonment or closure. The big challenge is that neither Partners nor the city knows how many virtually vacant churches are out there, nor do we have a comprehensive program to assess the relative significance of at-risk churches so that we can target our resources and save the best of them.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Making strategic investments in the most important and valuable of our sacred places requires us, first, to gather and organize everything we know about the architectural, historical, social service, and economic values of sacred places, and to use this data to set priorities and make choices. Some high-priority buildings are occupied by small congregations that may be able to survive and grow with the right assistance. Others that are vacant or almost vacant will need assistance to discourage demolition and encourage transition to new uses that contribute to neighborhood health and vitality. In either case, Partners will seek to collaborate with denominational leaders to funnel resources and encourage good planning.

GATHER DISPARATE INFORMATION.

One significant indicator of the importance of a sacred place is its economic "halo effect." Partners for Sacred Places and the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice recently completed a pilot research study of this factor, built upon the work done in SPAR. Our researchers looked at factors in three broad areas – direct congregational spending, the impact of day care programs and schools, and catalytic impacts (e.g., open space and community development) – and identified 54 types of measurable economic impacts that congregations make on their communities. (The full Halo Effect pilot report is at www.sacredplaces.org.)

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We need to gather information about other aspects of the importance of Philadelphia's religious buildings, including

- The building's architectural or cultural value, using already established eligibility criteria for the National Register of Historic Places and the Philadelphia City Register;
- The building's context within its neighborhood; does it relate to an important commercial corridor or designated Main Street district, for example, or is it pinpointed in Philadelphia2035, the new comprehensive plan undertaken by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission?
- The building's impact on housing values and crime levels—a factor that Partners hopes to assess in partnership with The Reinvestment Fund.

USE THE DATA TO HELP SET PRIORITIES.

Once this data is gathered and sacred places are assessed and prioritized, Partners for Sacred Places, the City of Philadelphia and other stakeholders can deliver appropriate, targeted assistance. Small congregations that need help to build their leadership capacity or fundraising skills can benefit from Partners' New Dollars/New Partners for Your Sacred Place training. Others that are well positioned to partner with their communities to share space for the arts or social services may benefit from a planning or capital grant. Vacant churches that defy ready reuse can benefit from a community-wide organizing and design process that might include a charrette to consider new uses for former worship spaces, as Partners did for three parish complexes in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, last year.

INFLUENCE DENOMINATIONAL AND DIOCESAN LEADERS.

The work of gathering data, setting priorities, and providing resources must be done in collaboration with those who make decisions about congregational development and property closure. Partners' goal is to work with faith leaders before congregations and parishes reach the breaking point. If denominational leaders work collaboratively with other stakeholders to target resources, investing in promising congregations and smoothing the transition for vacant buildings, many more of our most important sacred places can be saved, contributing in new and powerful ways to the life and vitality of Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

A. ROBERT JAEGER is the president of Partners for Sacred Places, a national, non-sectarian, non-profit organization devoted to helping congregations and their communities sustain and actively use older and historic sacred places.

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