

Like her parents before her, Heather Dingwell worshipped in the United Church in New Glasgow, Prince Edward Island all her life. From her home she could see the white clapboard and dark Gothic windows of the 1840 church, and the 65-foot steeple adorned with a 1920s ornamental cross. Although she witnessed the decline of the congregation to fewer than 20 people, she was still devastated by the 2007 decision to close and sell the church.

“We discussed decommissioning for a long time,” says Ms. Dingwell. “In the end there wasn’t much resistance to going ahead with it. It was the logical thing to be done. But from an emotional perspective, it was incredibly difficult.”

The town considered purchasing the church for a meeting hall, but balked at the maintenance costs. The steeple required \$8,000 in repairs, and the stone foundation needed attention. Ultimately, it sold to a private bidder. A decommissioning service was held in June, and its impressive steeple will soon be removed, as stipulated by the United Church’s P.E.I. Presbytery.

Churches are landmarks in the gently undulating rural landscape of P.E.I., appearing at roadsides every five or six kilometres. Or at least they used to be. Because here—as in most of rural Canada—they are closing and being demolished at an alarming rate, victims of shifting demographics, rising maintenance and operating costs, and the fact that most denominations resist the heritage designation of their buildings, arguing that it limits their ability to manage their assets.

# Preserving Religious Heritage The Next Great Heritage Conservation

by Christopher Wiebe



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brighton, Ontario





# ious Buildings— Struggle for vation

Photo: Nancy Anderson



# Church Closures Are Painful

As sites of religious ceremony and ritual, churches embody the connection between the earthly and the divine. They are places where profound human experiences such as baptisms, weddings and funerals occur. For these reasons, losing a church creates particularly raw wounds.

In P.E.I. this pain is most acutely felt in rural areas. Only 55 per cent of the province's residents live in centres of 1,000 or over. Harry Holman, director of P.E.I.'s

department of Culture, Heritage, Recreation and Sport, says that urban congregations may entirely disappear, but in rural areas the core constituency usually still remains.

"You typically have a legacy congregation in rural areas," says Mr. Holman. "And the attachment to a church building is perhaps stronger than in urban areas. The church may be the only building left that points to a former

community—the community hall, general store and school are all long gone."

Catherine Hennessey, former Charlottetown councillor and well-known heritage activist, says each P.E.I. church denomination is faring differently.

"The Anglicans quietly mothball buildings, the Presbyterians seem to be all right at the moment and the Baptists are growing by leaps and bounds," she says.

The United and Catholic churches are facing particular challenges. P.E.I. Catholic Bishop Vernon Fougere saw the difficulties facing the diocese: utility and maintenance costs are high, congregations are shrinking and there's a shift in who does the work of the church. In the 1970s there were 50 priests and 80 nuns in the diocese. There are now only 31 priests and fewer than 12 nuns in active parish ministry, and the majority are advanced in years. Priests have up to five congregations under their charge and they are burning out.

"Whether churches will close or not close is not the issue," Charlottetown vicar-general Father John Lacey said this past November. "We're already struggling with that." What the diocese is trying to do, he says, is to manage the restructuring of P.E.I.'s Catholic parishes rationally rather than let them close haphazardly.

Shortly after his installation in 1994, Bishop Fougere created a Diocesan Pastoral Initiatives Council of lay people and priests to redraw the parish borders, reducing their number from the existing 59 to a mere 17. This degree of consultation is unusual. After reviewing the experiences in other North American dioceses, Bishop Fougere "found that the parish restructuring and amalgamation process worked best when there was extensive consultation with parishioners," says Joe Byrne of the P.E.I. diocese. While the church recognizes it has an important legacy of church buildings, the "church of the poor" is ultimately about people and not about

## Quebec—An Example For Us All?

In Quebec, where the decline in attendance at places of worship has been exceptionally precipitous, there has been a more proactive, arm's-length provincial response. After a decade of discussion and federal-provincial action in the 1980s, the Conseil du patrimoine religieux du Québec was created in 1995. It brought together members of nearly all faith traditions, most of whom had rarely considered heritage conservation part of their responsibilities.

The Conseil has since received funding of over \$160 million from the Government of Quebec. In 2007-2008, it disbursed \$14 million in grants (from \$30,000 to \$850,000 per project) for restoration work on 103 religious buildings in every region of the province. The Conseil has also undertaken inventory activities and supported the Montréal international seminar on churches in 2005, *What Future for Which Churches?* Other parts of Canada can learn from this fruitful approach to recognizing the public value of religious heritage. In Manitoba, for instance, the Thomas Sill Foundation's Prairie Churches Program has distributed almost \$250,000 in grants to the province's historic churches.



Photo: CPPRO



# Community Assets

The closure of historic religious buildings and the threat of their demolition frequently unleashes strong emotions, even in the wider community. These buildings remind us of local history, they exhibit irreplaceable architecture and craftsmanship, and they often provide needed space for community activities and social services, in addition to serving as places of worship.

Earlier this year there was uproar in Winnipeg when the massive, empty First Church of Christ Scientist in the Osborne Village neighbourhood was temporarily slated for demolition. Residents argued it was one of the most important buildings in the area, even though most had never been inside it!

maintaining temporal assets. Since 1994 there have been three church closures, but more will come. Catherine Hennessey thinks the Catholic diocese of P.E.I. has approached its predicament very reasonably.

“The United Church,” she says, “has been far less respectful. I get calls from people all the time who are weeping that their churches are being taken away and they have no recourse. Pews and church fittings have been callously thrown out. The process has often seemed cold and brutal.”

There is no question the United Church is experiencing a profound, protracted crisis in church membership. Reverend David Ewart of Capilano United Church in Vancouver looked at trends of the United Church between 1965 and 2005. Official church membership has fallen from 1.1 million to under 600,000.

“My prediction,” writes the Rev. Ewart, “is that if nothing changes the steady decline in our ‘people data,’ the tremendous assets of our property and investments will become an unmanageable burden that will overwhelm the capabilities of many congregations and force their closure as they are unable to cope with building operation, maintenance and capital repairs and upgrades. We are asset rich and people poor, and our wealth just might be the death of us.”

Short-term decisions based on perceptions of membership statistics have implications for the long term. “We haven’t done an inventory of our historic buildings up to this point,” says Michelle Hogman at the United Church’s Toronto head office. “But there may be sites in Canada that have high historic significance and these will have to be identified and protected.”



St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brighton, Ontario

Photo: Nancy Anderson

## Why Religious Buildings Close

The reasons behind the closure of historic houses of worship are as varied as their congregations. Dwindling attendance, high maintenance and conservation costs, and increased land values in urban areas (which make building sites attractive for redevelopment) are all factors leading to their loss.

Other factors precipitating closure include new styles of

worship that are incompatible with traditional buildings, energy efficiency and accessibility costs, and the amalgamation of smaller churches into one central church.

Suburban sprawl can also play a role. Central Pentecostal Tabernacle in Edmonton, a 1960s architectural icon, was abandoned by its congregation, which gravitated from its

inner-city roots to the suburbs. The church was demolished in 2007.

In Brighton, Ontario the 1877 St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church was demolished last year to the dismay of the town. The remaining 12 congregants had made demolition a condition of sale because they did not want to see the building put to an inappropriate use.



# P.E.I. Central Queens Pastoral Charge

## P.E.I. South Shore Pastoral Charge



Photo: Melanie Taylor

In the P.E.I. pastoral charge of South Shore, it is the handling of these church assets that has left a bitter taste in the mouths of some former United Church members. Over the past two years four historic churches have been closed, and a large new one—South Shore United Church—has been built to replace them. The old church in Hampton is now a dental clinic, Crapaud's a family home and Victoria's, purchased by an Ontario resident, sits empty and unmaintained.

The story of the fourth church, in Bonshaw, is one of disappointment but ultimately, hope. Built in 1867, the wooden, 100-seat Bonshaw United Church was the oldest church in the area. Discussions around its closure began in 2005.

"The community tried to buy it from the P.E.I. presbytery to use as a meeting hall," says former church member Sheldon

MacNevin. "We received strong indications from them that the transaction would go through, but in the end it didn't happen." The church was sold in 2007 to the highest bidder for \$40,000, and local residents were extremely disappointed. "I feel the presbytery really let us down," he says.

Thankfully, that private buyer was a local resident who purchased the building out of fear that it would be demolished. He initially leased it out as an antique shop, but the community later developed a successful proposal for the Bonshaw Hall Co-operative—a space for social, charity and cultural events. The co-operative, now with a 15-year, \$1-a-year lease agreement and an option to purchase, is responsible for maintaining and upgrading the building, has recovered discarded church pews and is working to recreate the small steeple that was torn down.

To the northeast, in the Central Queens Pastoral Charge, there has also been uneven success in the church amalgamation process. Again, four churches were combined into one new church and the historic churches were sold. One, North Wiltshire United, was torn down in an agonizingly slow, year-long process that residents found painful.

A new use was found for the Hunter River United Church. Long-time residents and churchgoers Melanie and Kris Taylor purchased the church in July 2007 and over the past year transformed it into the Harmony House Theatre, a musical performance and theatre space.

Sadly, much of the heritage fabric of the old church, including its pointed arched windows and short steeple, has been lost, but the shell of the building remains, as do some of the interior features. Melanie Taylor says its transition to a community space fills a local and regional need.

"There is now a non-denominational gathering place in Hunter River," she says. A community development study was done which, given Hunter River's location halfway between Summerside and Charlottetown, indicated a niche for this kind of venue.



Photo: Melanie Taylor

**Top left:** Hunter River United Church, P.E.I., before 2007.

**En haut, à gauche :** L'Église unie Hunter River (Î.-P.-É.) avant 2007.

**Above:** Heritage fabric being removed from the former Hunter River United Church.

**En haut :** Enlèvement du tissu patrimonial de l'ancienne église unie Hunter River.

**Top right:** The former Hunter River United Church, now Harmony House Theatre.

**En haut, à droite :** L'ancienne église unie Hunter River, maintenant le théâtre Harmony House.



# Changing P.E.I. Landscape

As churches change or disappear, the pastoral texture of the island changes with it.

“Churches and barns define the Prince Edward Island landscape,” says historian Bill Glen, “but it is changing due to demographics and other forces. Hurricane Juan in 2003 was the nail in the coffin for many of these old buildings on the island’s south shore, ripping off their roofs or doing damage people can’t afford to fix.”

How to respond to this new reality for churches, in particular, has left municipal and provincial governments in awkward new territory.

“There is much head scratching as to the role of government in this,” says Harry Holman. “If we help out one congregation, where do we stop?”

Stepping back and taking a longer view of church history, there have been similar major changes in other periods. Michelle Hogman observes that amalgamating churches was common around the 1920s following the phase of rapid church construction at the end of the 19th century. “There is a sense of fluidity evidenced in the reading of congregational histories,” she says. “The creation of the United Church of Canada in 1925 alone created many redundant churches.”

These longer views of historical processes may not remove the sting, however, for families losing the churches in which their ancestors worshipped. The future of Canada’s extraordinary legacy of church buildings is poised to be the next great struggle on the heritage conservation horizon. ■

## Did You Know?

Residents of P.E.I. aren’t sure how many churches are on the island—there has never been a comprehensive inventory. Newfoundland began counting religious buildings and is up to 1,700 while Quebec has come up with approximately 2,800.



Photo: Melanie Taylor

**Christopher Wiebe** has written on the cultural scene for Canadian newspapers and magazines. Most recently, he penned an article on the loss of rural farmland in *Westworld Alberta* magazine.

## New Life for Religious Buildings

When historic places of worship are closed, many congregations and communities work to preserve them by supporting their sensitive reuse. Some have been modestly adapted to fulfill community service needs, while others have been more extensively converted for commercial and residential uses. Still others have been successfully adapted to new uses while continuing to function for religious worship.

In 2003, Notre-Dame-de-Jacques-Cartier Church in Québec City was partially converted to accommodate office space for social and community groups in the church’s side galleries. Dating from the mid-19th century, the

traditional design lent itself to the installation of removable gypsum-board walls separating the new office space from the main gallery, altar and organ. Inside, the size of the place of worship is reduced while the exterior remains unchanged, ensuring historical continuity in the surrounding neighbourhood.

**For more information on threatened places of worship see HCF’s 2008 Endangered Churches Shortlist released on World Heritage Day at: [www.heritagecanada.org](http://www.heritagecanada.org)**

## Some remain at risk

In Toronto, the downtown All Saints’ Anglican Church was decommissioned as a parish in the 1970s in response to a dwindling congregation. It was reconstituted as a community centre which continues to be owned and operated by the diocese. Services include a drop-in, food bank, seniors’ program, harm reduction addiction education, arts program and more.

Unfortunately, the new use is not generating the revenues needed to prevent the building’s deterioration. Floor joists are rotting, support columns are weakening and the roofing system is wearing out. Inside, many unique elements have been preserved, including one



of Toronto’s best repositories of an unbroken sequence of stained and stencilled glass windows, an inlaid Minton encaustic tile floor, a 1918 Casavant organ, and more.

With downtown land values skyrocketing, the revenue potential of selling is no doubt attractive, leaving the future of this Cabbagetown landmark in jeopardy.