

# Tear down the churches and invest in people

This has nothing to do with the current discussion of the location of a new Sikh Temple. The discussion did, however, spark a look at the state of the Church in Guelph. There are almost 60 churches sprinkled across the city, and many of them are not healthy.

Many are, in fact, dying or, at best, on life support. Many of them have few or no children, and a peek through their doors on a Sunday morning would reflect a tiny smattering of faithful grey-haired women. The buildings are maintained as a result of generous bequests.

Granted, there are also notable exceptions. A few churches hold multiple services in order to accommodate the crowds, offering a wide menu of programs for children and youth. They are, as noted, the exception.

There is a need to re-imagine the church in order to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century needs. A century-old stone structure — housing two dozen parishioners — is unsustainable. Their design does not meet the needs of an aging population or surrounding neighbourhoods. What's more, it is an unwise use of financial resources.

What better place to reinvent the church than in Guelph? Call it a new Reformation with a strong focus on people and programs rather than on institutions and structures. There is something fundamentally wrong when a church needs to spend several millions of dollars just to maintain an aging building while, inside, the faithful few plan their next bake sale.

A church is a spiritual refuelling station for



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its members and it is designed to be a support system for the neighbourhood. It is therefore both impractical and unnecessary for churches with very small memberships to maintain costly properties. It is, however, still necessary for them to maintain a community presence where they can continue to provide neighbourhood services, such as food and clothing programs, and facilities for various kinds of support groups.

Imagine a huge multi-faith centre where churches share facilities and common areas, and where there is plenty of parking for all.

Here is but one example of what such a facility could look like:

Engel closed its 230,000-square-foot factory at the corner of Woodlawn and Elmira roads in May 2008. The building has been sitting vacant for two years. It sits on 24 acres of land.

A multi-faith centre within that building could accommodate 40 churches meeting simultaneously in 5,000-square-foot spaces. That would still leave space for dozens of classrooms to accommodate Sunday school, nurseries and meeting rooms, as well as a common area for a Tim Hortons franchise. An office wing could

accommodate the administrative needs of clergy and church secretaries with an in-house print shop. Youth programs could be either denominational or they could become inter-denominational.

But one should not ignore the community centres where the “real” ministry happens and where the needs of communities are met. These would be storefront centres, and their focus would be as varied as their neighbourhoods.

There is obviously at least one caveat to this suggestion. It implies co-operation between denominations. In many cases, the church buildings are owned by a diocese, presbytery or convention. Closing them and selling off the property would be an incredibly painstaking, political process.

It would also need to involve co-operation between clergy and congregations, often within the same denomination. It would need to involve a shared vision by hundreds of church leaders of all stripes across the city. Unity of purpose and vision is elusive at the best of times — especially within the broader church.

Agreed, that multi-faith centre probably won't happen this side of Eternity. We tend to be too protective of our own cathedrals and worship spaces. At best, it is hoped that churches will ask themselves: “Is there a better way to do ministry?”

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