What is Mission-Central for Bricks and Their Mortals: The Question in the Crucible
After a years-long marathon, FBOs are in for a desperate sprint.

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Restored carving at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City. Photo by Whitney Cox

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) never had it easy. For many FBOs, a confluence of factors – declining membership, rising operating costs, a skyrocketing real estate market and crumbling buildings – presented a mounting existential threat to individual congregations long before the onset of a global pandemic. FBOs in New York City and across the country have always served the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of their communities. But they are doing so now with ever-diminishing resources.

The benefits of these services, so compellingly captured in The Economic Halo Effect studies by Partners for Sacred Places (https://sacredplaces.org/info/publications/halo-studies/), impact not only those individuals who warm the pews week-by-week but our civic community as a whole. The social and spiritual services that FBOs provide are an essential part of our network of support for the most vulnerable among us, and when churches are abandoned those services vanish too.

We find ourselves in a crucible of circumstances that demands a creative reinvention of who we are, what we are meant to do, for whom, and how. The fact that this crisis is global does nothing to ease the acute pressures that this new reality imposes on each individual and organization. After years of caring for the needy on dwindling budgets, FBOs are now faced with severe societal needs on a massive scale at the very moment they are wondering how to financially survive themselves. After a years-long marathon, FBOs are in for a desperate sprint.

For anyone who suggests that congregating is a thing of the past because the tools of virtual connection have supplanted physical proximity, I offer a challenge. Get three people on a video call and ask them to sing together. It's impossible. The slightest delay reveals the vast distance between us, and the song, this primordial act of communion, unravels. Despite all the ways this technological moment has changed the nature of our distance, the distance remains. And this fragmentation reminds us of the beauty and power of our voices when they join. Something intangibly more than its parts emerges when we gather together, and our houses of worship sing the songs of their civic communities in ways that resonate far beyond the pews.

The fractured silence that persists in the absence of song is an acute, temporary pain that exists amid this crisis. But the greater threat is that through the steady entropy of relentless pressure, that silence grows as more FBOs fold and vanish.

The confluence of factors threatening FBOs across the city also makes their properties red hot targets for a whole range of interests, especially in established and soon-to-be-developed neighborhoods. The lots that churches sit on are uniquely valuable because they are typically uniquely large. With many churches in a continually weakened financial state, these properties grow increasingly attractive to for-profit, non-profit and municipal real estate developers, and of course there are advocacy groups with targeted interests, organizations in need of space and community concerns about preservation and density control. When word gets out that a church is considering its options, they are routinely bombarded with external advice about what they should do.

If all FBOs can be said to share one common trait, it might be that through their varied faith traditions they are universally inclined toward the common good. Rooted in faith convictions, their decisions are guided by mission and values. But "mission" for FBOs is notoriously broad. If the mission can be defined as "I am my brother's keeper", any good act could be said to be mission consistent.

When considering real estate assets, is it *mission consistent* for an FBO to support affordable housing? To provide robust social services? To fight climate change? Or gentrification? Or homelessness? Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes. These are all good goals and can all be said to be *mission consistent*, which up to now has been the gold standard of ethical real estate management for FBOs. But no congregation has the resources to do all these, so which agenda wins? Of all the good things other people want you to do with your space, which is most important and most appropriate for you?

Well, it all depends.

Mission consistent is too low a bar to be useful in prioritizing resources. The challenge instead is to determine what is *mission central* to us, now? The answer to this will be different in every neighborhood and will be different today than it was in February.

So instead we distill this vast spectrum of possibilities into a single question (*The Question*): How do we best leverage our assets to the greatest benefit of our community?

The Answer to The Question requires creative thinking from each angle: What are our assets? What value do they have? To whom? Who is our community? What are their needs? How can we best meet them? And if the answers to these questions were ever simple or universal, they certainly aren't now.

Which presents us with an opportunity at this moment – a purpose in the crucible. The definition of "community", the landscape of "need" and the disposition of "assets", are radically changing. By thinking more broadly about what each of these means to our institutions, our Answer to The Question can get more nuanced, more specific and ultimately, more relevant. Therein lie the tools for reinvention.

Bricks & Mortals was conceived as a support group for faith-based organizations who have troubled relationships with their real estate. Formed in 2016 as an ad-hoc coalition of churches hosted in the office of the Manhattan Borough President, it is currently sponsored by Judson Memorial Church and is in the process of formalizing its structure and mission as a 501(c)(3). Our volunteer leadership comprises faith leaders and lay professionals who have all signed conflict of interest agreements. The organization exists to facilitate a process that sorts through the universe of competing agendas. We enable our members to navigate this process by providing resources, connections with allied professionals and partner organizations, and the collective wisdom of the New York City faith community. Our goal is to leverage the experience and expertise of our network to provide support and guidance as each congregation maps out their own unique plan to align their assets with their mission, values and the call to the common good.

Crucibles are implements of creation. What passes through them becomes malleable to be re-formed again. Even if things lose their shape for now – the door is wide open for radical reinvention.

For Faith-Based Organizations who are interested in getting involved with Bricks & Mortals or have specific questions about real estate assets and challenges, you may reach out to Kate Toth, the Bricks & Mortals Project Director at kate@judson.org. We will invite you to connect to other FBOs who have faced similar circumstances and provide resources to support your process.