

# Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites

Community Learnings About  
Reimagining Faith-Owned Property



**Bricks  
& Mortals**

# Dear friends and partners,

**A**s we close this five-year journey with the Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites program, I write with immense gratitude for our project partners, dedicated staff, and the Lilly Endowment. Our program began in 2021 as a bold experiment in helping congregations see their sacred buildings not as burdens, but as assets for renewal. Since then, this work has grown into a national movement of resilience, possibility, and faith in action.

Through the Congregational Learning Process, our cohorts in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and beyond discovered that sustainability is as much spiritual as it is structural. We learned that adaptive reuse does not diminish the sacred, it extends it. We learned that congregations thrive not by retreating from challenge but by embracing change—guided by mission, faith, and community.

Our greatest success has not only been the progress of each project, but in the courage of congregations and leaders who dared to dream differently about their sacred spaces. They opened their doors to new neighbors, partnered with artists and nonprofits, and reimagined their sanctuaries as centers for hope and service. Revitalization is not a single act, but an ongoing practice. Trust, deep listening, and the courage to begin are all required to (re)think the use of your space.

As this grant cycle concludes, we offer these stories not as a final word, but as a starting place for others who may benefit from lessons learned. May this collection inspire congregations across the country to see possibilities where others see decline, and to believe that sacred spaces, like the communities they serve, can always be renewed.

With sustained hope for the future,

**Kate Toth**  
Executive Director  
Bricks & Mortals

# Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites

Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites was a five year project designed to demonstrate adaptive, revenue-producing, and sustainable uses for faith-owned property.

Through the five-year program, congregations increased the resources they have to survive and thrive in their community.



## A Snapshot of Our Work

44

Congregations participating in the program



165

Individual participants

2

Customized technical assistance sessions per congregation



275+

Coaching meetings per year

5

States represented



3

In-person capstone gatherings

10

Webinars each year

## Example Webinar Topics

- Navigating Change with your Congregation
- Enhancing Relevance for Today's Churchgoer - and Non-churchgoer
- From Conflict and Misunderstanding to Effective Communication
- The Church Life Cycle: Where Are We?
- Exploring and Refining Your Mission and Purpose
- Navigating Politics in an Election Year

# Sharing Space and Embracing Community

Edgewater Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Illinois

Standing at 52,000 square feet and taking up an entire city block in Chicago, Edgewater Presbyterian Church is larger than your average house of worship. The congregation's current building was designed and built by the congregation in 1926 to serve as "The New Community House" and dedicated to offering programming for a diverse array of fellowships for the church and community. At the time, there was a gymnasium hosting team sports, a men's glee club, a Boy Scouts troop, missionary societies, and one of the largest Bible studies in the U.S.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, plans to build an adjacent sanctuary and worship space halted. Church members mortgaged their own homes to prevent foreclosure and protect the resources the New Community House provided. The open doors offered comfort to the community during a challenging

time, and in the early 1930s, church membership reached 1,500 people, with Sunday school enrollment climbing to 2,100 youth and adults.

"100 years ago, this congregation was already thinking outside the box. The New Community House was designed to be a resource for the community,

even without a worship space. Our focus on community is not a new idea. This congregation has been community-facing for over a century," says Rev. Kristin Hutson.

**Today, Edgewater Presbyterian Church is home to nearly a dozen nonprofit organizations, multiple theatre groups, over a dozen artists, musicians, and writers, and numerous social service groups and programs.** Recently, the church has welcomed a progressive, LGBTQAI-inclusive unschooled collective and has offered their full-size gym to an organization that serves hundreds of unaccompanied youth.



Affordable space within the church has helped these groups thrive and fulfill their mission.

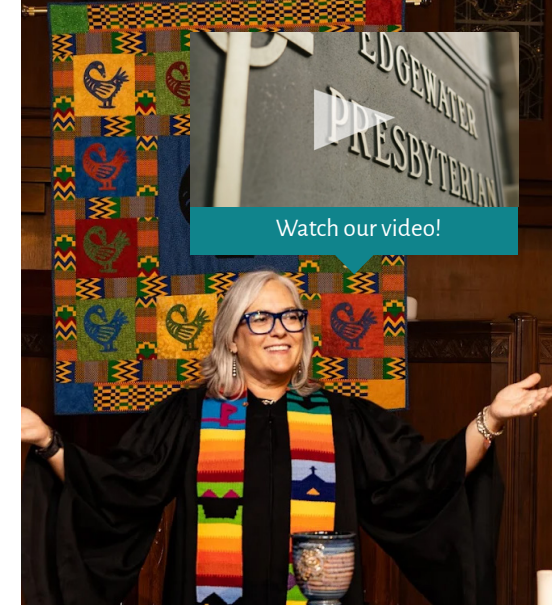
"When I first got here, we had a tendency to refer to others in the building as tenants. The word that is more consistent with our theology and our values is 'space sharer,'" says Rev. Hutson.

**Each week Edgewater welcomes nearly 500 visitors, most of whom are an extension of the space sharer community and not members of the congregation.** They are connected to the church through the magnificent building, bustling with life and community. On any given day, when you walk the halls of Edgewater, you might hear songs of worship from the congregation, watch local actors rehearse for a play, observe kids playing ball in the gym, see a potter packing up goods for sale, or notice a food distribution site for those in need.

"As an S4 coach, I encouraged them to think about other ways they could collaborate and invite the space sharers to view the building as a shared responsibility," says Coach Linden Leman.

Nearly 100 years after the opening of the New Community House, the Edgewater Presbyterian Church continues to fulfill its mission of serving others through worship and welcome. **It is a vibrant space that is a true reflection of the city of Chicago.**

"We're not just inviting you in to come and pray with us. We're inviting you in to do your art, to do your performance, to do your good



Watch our video!

Kristin Hutson, Edgewater Presbyterian Church

works in the way you do them. We are not expecting you to be who we are—we are allowing people to be who they are," says Rev. Hutson.

## Lesson

Meaningful connections are rooted within your congregation and also within your community. Use your building in a way that aligns with your congregation's calling to serve others.

# Forward is Forward:

## Trusting God's Pace of Progress



### Calvary Lutheran Church in Hauppauge, New York

Pastor Zachary Dean has described his church as a 60-year old startup, a community still in the process of becoming. "I am the fifth pastor at Calvary Lutheran and the world is not the same place as when the church was built. When I got here, the congregation was eager to begin writing a mission statement to guide us into the future."

A committed group of congregants **engaged in the mission statement writing process, which was grounded in deep community trust.** The group was governed by three consensus criteria to approve a mission statement: Do you understand it? Do you agree with it? Will you publicly support it?

The plan was to meet for a single day, but the group was so engaged that a second day was added. The sessions concluded with consensus on the following: The mission of Calvary Lutheran, a welcoming and nurturing church, is to provide a community where all can receive and share God's love.

With a welcoming mission and a goal of becoming a more diverse community, Calvary Lutheran decided to live out these callings in two key ways:

**1. Reimagine spiritual space:** The congregation decided to develop a welcoming statement for the LGBTQIA+ community, as part of the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Program. The RIC Program and welcoming statement is one public way to see, name, celebrate, and advocate for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions in the Lutheran church.

**2. Reimagine physical space:** The original church building was set far back away from the road, and plans to construct a closer structure never broke ground. With the door to the building located in the back versus the front, the church appeared unwelcoming and was physically inaccessible to some community members.

"It was scary to walk into a room full of people—some of whom had been here for 30 years—and suggest we blow a hole in the side of our building to create a more welcoming entrance. I would show up to my S4 coaching sessions and say 'I'm scared' and my coach Mia Douglas would say 'Of course you're scared, your congregation is doing big things.'"

With building renovations soon underway, including utilizing green space to host community events, the welcome statement proved a more delicate challenge. "During the mission statement consensus, people said they agreed, understood, and would support being a welcoming church. That was put to the test when we put the mission into practice and it all came back to understanding. We did a lot of educational work as a congregation to create a shared definition of what it means to fulfill our mission of being welcoming," said Pastor Zach.

The congregation held educational events such as forums and book studies to learn how the holy scripture testifies to a God who loves and creates all people in splendid diversity. The draft welcoming statement language was worked and reworked by the congregation. While the mission and goals workshop took two days, **the welcoming statement process took over two years.**

"We live in a quick-fix society and I often wished the process moved faster. In my coaching sessions, my S4 Coach Mia would say 'Forward progress is forward. Period.' The pace of work mattered less than the good progress we were making."

Pastor Zach describes the importance of



Zachary Dean (right), Calvary Lutheran Church

having faith in where his congregation and God called him to go: to build a welcoming church for a diverse community, no matter how long it took to fulfill that calling.

"I once heard that discernment is the process of listening and praying for the validation of what you are called to do. That process and pace is different for every community and that is okay."

## Lesson

Big, bold change can be scary and take time. Even when it feels like you are moving slowly, accept guidance from God and listen to the calling of your community.

# Have Faith in the First Step:

## A Church Champion of Renewable Energy

### Church of the Atonement in Chicago, Illinois

Like many historic churches, the Church of the Atonement in Chicago, Illinois emerged from the pandemic with big questions: How can we serve our neighborhood now? What values do we hold? What are we being called to do?

**In 2021, a building assessment estimated \$8 million in needed repairs.** “A lot of the time, we had been putting off the important long-term work to keep daily operations going,” shared Carl Klein, a member of the church’s buildings and property guild.

Atonement learned of Bricks & Mortals and joined the S4 program with an open mindset to see what they could learn. Early on, the congregation felt overwhelmed and frightened by the scale of the work ahead. But rather than trying to do everything at once, they worked closely with Linden Leman, their S4 coach, and committed to

taking small, tangible steps to define their upcoming project.

Linden remembered Richard Benson, a member of the church leadership vestry, expressing an early interest in solar energy. That spark became an opportunity when the team discovered a climate infrastructure grant offered by the city. They pulled together an application in just three weeks.

“Both sides of my family have worked in the fossil fuel industry,” Richard shared. “Fossil fuels have given us stability and cheap energy, but at the same time, when you know better, you can do better.”

The effort paid off. In May 2023, the church was awarded \$250,000 from the City of Chicago to restore its roof and install insulation, allowing for a future installation of solar panels.

**The grant was an opportunity to chip away at the deferred maintenance costs and embrace the team’s commitment to creation care—protecting the beauty of God’s planet and all of His creations that inhabit it.**

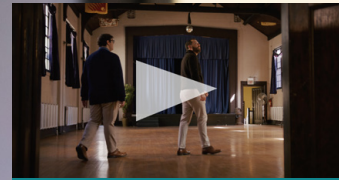
“It reaffirmed that we were doing the right thing,” Carl said.

With available rebates and energy savings, the solar project is expected to pay for itself within a year of completion. “Sometimes you just need a victory to feel confident in your abilities. I now know that I can help others do the same,” Richard says.

As a result of the project, he currently helps lead Eco DioChicago, which supports Episcopal churches in reaching net-zero carbon emissions. This past November, the initiative was promoted from “Working Group” to “Diocesan Committee” which provides status, budget, and staying power in the diocese’s governance structure. Their goal is to help the diocese and its over 100 parishes reach net-zero by 2030.

The church’s Coach reflects, “I’m most proud of the Atonement team’s culture shift. They started from a sense of perfectionism and moved toward a willingness to just start and see what happens.”

Today, the team is well on their way to continuing care for their building, God’s creation, and lighting a solar-powered path for others to follow in their footsteps.



Watch our video!



Richard Benson, Church of the Atonement

## Lesson

You don’t have to know everything to get started. When the options feel overwhelming, choose one step, take it in faith, and let it guide the rest.



## Nourished by Faith: Navigating Change in Your Church

Unidad y Fe in Queens, New York

**W**hen Pastor Leticia Alanis was diagnosed with lymphoma, she found herself reflecting deeply on the direction of her life. One question in particular shaped her future: “If I die tomorrow, would I be satisfied or wish I had done more?” This became a profound encounter with God that transformed her path. Feeling called to ministry, Leticia answered that call and became a pastor.

Her journey brought her to Unidad y Fe, a small congregation facing its own season of transformation in Queens, NY. Having sold their original church building, the congregation was navigating uncertainty about its future. **With a new pastor, no permanent home, and fewer members than before, Unidad y Fe stood at the**

**threshold of a new and undefined chapter.**

In time, the congregation found a new space, an old diner in the Woodhaven neighborhood of Queens. For Pastor Leticia, the diner became a powerful symbol. Once a place where neighbors gathered to be fed, it was now a space where all could gather and be nourished by faith.

With guidance from their S4 Coach, the congregation embraced this season as a chance to reflect deeply on who they were called to be. Coach Mia Dougals encouraged them to slow down and ask the essential question: “What is your deep

reason for being here?”

Through prayer, dialogue, and discernment, Unidad y Fe began to clarify its mission. Pastor Leticia and Outreach Coordinator Karen drew on their own experiences as immigrants, shaped by struggle, resilience, and faith. These personal stories grounded the congregation in a mission rooted in social justice.

**From these conversations emerged a bold new ministry: an immigration resource center housed within the church.** The center offers vital support to help immigrants settle, thrive, and build lives in their new communities. For Unidad y Fe, this ministry became faith in action, an extension of worship where advocacy and service go hand in hand. The center is a safe, welcoming space where people connect with God and find strength as they navigate change together.

Throughout this journey, S4 provided crucial space for Unidad y Fe to think creatively about the future while staying deeply connected to their social justice mission. Coach Mia helped the congregation view challenges as opportunities for innovation. Change is hard, but also provides new ways to serve God and meet the needs of the community.



Watch our video!



Leticia Alanis, Unidad y Fe Church

## Lesson

To thrive in times of change, try to find space to think creatively about the future, take guidance from trusted partners, and seek encouragement from God and your congregation.



# Making a Case for Community Investment

Covenant United Church of Christ in South Holland, Illinois

For nearly a decade, The Barbara W. Smith Family Life Center at the Covenant United Church of Christ has provided deeply valuable programs and resources to the community of South Holland, Illinois.

“Our programs are designed to create opportunities in growing our local economy, building equity, and enhancing the quality of life for the residents in our communities,” says Rev. Dr. Troy Underwood.

In 2019, The Barbara W. Smith (BWS) Family Life Center at Covenant United Church of Christ established its mission to provide individuals and families with valuable programs and resources to support human flourishing and well-being. As of 2023, South Holland is 81%

Black or African American, 10% White, 7% Hispanic or Latino, and 2% other races. The community is richly diverse, and the BWS Family Life Center is committed to initiatives encompassing youth mentoring and education, as well as vital support and mutual aid services in food, advocacy and social justice, health and wellness, and environmental sustainability programs.

One flagship program is the STEAM Center, which is dedicated to establishing a transformative pathway for educational programming in the fields of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. **Through the STEAM Center, the BWS Family Life Center strives to break down barriers and create equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status.**

“By addressing the educational disparities that exist in the south suburbs of Cook County, the church is actively working towards building a more inclusive and equitable community, where every student has the chance to unlock their full potential,” says Rev. Underwood.

In 2023, the STEAM Center received a major grant from the Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) to support youth development in the southern suburbs of Cook County. This funding launched the STEAM Summer Camp, serving students in grades 3–8 and integrating hands-on STEAM learning with targeted reading and math enrichment to help close learning gaps created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Center shared the program’s impact—and the Church’s vision for its future—community investment and support grew. The program’s success resulted in an award of more than half a million dollars to continue this work through 2026.

**To date, more than 150 students have participated in the Center’s programming, with a vision to reach at least 200 students by 2027.**



## Lesson

Quantifying the impact of your church project or program can inspire support from your congregation, your community, and beyond.

# Stewardship of Sacred Spaces:

A Seminary Curriculum on Faith and Property

One of the most important questions facing theological education today is this: **How do faith leaders care for their sacred spaces in a world that is constantly changing?**

Congregations operate amid shifting demographics, rising property costs, and evolving community needs. These challenges aren't just about buildings or money. They raise deep questions about faith, values, and responsibility.

Sustainable Solutions for Sacred Sites led to the creation of a seminary course that explores the theology of hospitality, property, and sustainability. The course invites future leaders to connect theology with the real decisions they will face in ministry.

The course draws from **multifaith voices**, each offering insight into what it means to receive land as both gift and responsibility. From the Hebrew Scriptures' vision of Jubilee, the Qur'anic call to balance human use with divine trust, the Indigenous reverence for land as ancestor, and the Christian confession of the Word made flesh who "dwelt among us," students discover that sacred space is not owned, but held in covenant.

The course asks seminarians to practice spiritual discernment as they consider how their ministries can reflect hospitality and justice through thoughtful use of property. As part of the development process, Rev. Dr. Derrick McQueen, Ph.D. gathered **feedback from more than fifty peer reviewers**, including pastors, theologians, architects, developers, and community leaders. Their collective insights shaped three expressions of this work: a foundational seminary syllabus, a Doctor of Ministry

concentration for advanced study, and a continuing education course for working pastors seeking renewal in stewardship.

What began as a syllabus continues to evolve into a living conversation about how sacred spaces are a sign of God's liberating presence. **This work is designed to support seminaries nationwide**, helping to form leaders who see caring for sacred space as an act of faith, service, and witness.



Access the course here



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