



Church Crisis, Foundations Opportunity



BY REVEREND GRAHAM SINGH

Today's crisis around the church, residential schools and so many of Canada's historic institutions presents both a challenge and opportunity for Canada's granting foundations and charities.

For many Canadians, the church feels dangerous these days — even, toxic. A much needed conversation including Black Lives Matter, Me Too and the horrors of Residential Schools has been set on fire by the shocking discovery of the unmarked graves of beautiful, precious souls. Souls that deserve recognition in this life — and the next.

A group of monks and nuns recently wrote to all Catholic Bishops in Canada, demanding for an immediate plan not only for apologies, but also for concrete action in favour of Canada's First Nations. Several recent news articles have focused on

the hundreds of millions of dollars raised to rebuild church buildings, yet less than \$25 million awarded to residential school victims. Hundreds of professors at Ryerson University have signed a letter asking for that organizations' name to be changed, in shame for the extant Mr. Ryerson's own implication in creating the residential schools system. Where is the line of responsibility drawn?

In London, England, the 2010 Olympic Games took place on top of one of the largest toxic wastelands in Europe. Infrastructure visionaries saw the potential and a cleanup operation began decades before. No one can undo the atrocities committed on the ground of these newfound burial sites. However, what could be done to clean a toxic heritage on other lands of the church and related organizations, to the point where new civic dreams could come alive?

As a pastor based in Montreal, I can tell you those of us left standing are trying our best, yet the colonial culture that pervades our organization makes it so hard to change. A group of us from around Canada have established a new, secular, charity called the Trinity Centres Foundation to try to come up with new models not only for practical reparations and reconciliation, but for an entirely new model for engaging the \$45 billion of property wealth of the church.

Canada's wealthy families have little trust left in the church...

My experience as a minister says that being honest about these matters and the doubts and concerns of others, is indeed the best way to have conversations about a supernatural faith. In other words, protectionism, vague statements and little concrete action has a direct detrimental effect on the core business of the church: helping others see the God who made them, even despite our own deep failings.

In a recent event hosted by our foundation between Bishops and large granting foundations, Marc Manguin, CEO of Philanthropic Foundations of Canada made his point clear: Canada's wealthy families have little trust left in the church, however they do often feel a historic tie to the places which were created. Before impact investments were cool, these old colonial families built many of these churches. Their names are on the plaques.

Courts have and will deal with those questions

The question is: were these buildings built purely as places of faith, or were the donors' intention that they would become the social infrastructure of the future? What if a remediation of the toxicity could in fact reveal hundreds of millions of square feet of community spaces, right in the heart of cities where our charities and nonprofits most need it?


There is no toxic wasteland that acquires the resources to clean up, easily. What if the errant landowner benefits too much? Why should society or its non-religious charities contribute? Who should be held responsible for what happened? Courts have and will deal with many of those questions however the question remains: what about the land? Perhaps we should simply plough down all the churches and build affordable

housing. In some cases, that is indeed an excellent idea. Yet at the same time, this solution seems somehow lacking when we look at the old stone behemoths that line our main streets.

We are at an impasse

Enter the world of today's impact financing of social purpose real estate. This is the work of the Canadian Urban Institute, Imagine Canada, Community Foundations of Canada, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the National Trust for Canada, Canada's Social Finance Fund and the Senate of Canada's ongoing work looking at the financing of the social sector. Traditionally, these groups have avoided working with faith communities, for the reasons listed above and more. They are laser-focused on tangible progress towards equality for black, indigenous, LGBTQ2S Canadians, and more. These groups have something the church does not: deployable capital, aimed at social impact. We are at an impasse: can we connect these two great tides, or do we allow a tsunami of justice against the church, to destroy our urban landscapes.

These church properties may contain the missing link in social impact programs

More community-planned de-consecration is required to make this happen. This would allow a new re-consecration for the sacred work of reconciliation, embodied in the thriving of Canada's social sector and fuelled by investment-ready social purpose real estate plans, built by and with Canada's granting foundations. If only the church would see that this giving up of colonial power is a key to its own future of faith and service. If only Canada's granting foundations would see that these church properties may contain the missing link in so many social impact Investment programmes: real property on which to secure financing instruments. What if a new co-consecration of Canada's troubled faith properties is indeed the toxic remediation, we need most. 

THE REVEREND GRAHAM SINGH is an Anglican Priest in Montreal, graduate of the London School of Economics and founder of the Trinity Centres Foundation, a charity dedicated to transforming church properties for community impact.

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