

## Conversion

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At the conclusion of a chapter exploring the spirituality of diminishment, Joan Chittister tells this story:

A pilgrim was walking along a road when one day he passed what seemed to a monk sitting in a field. Nearby, men were working on a stone building. "You look like a monk," the pilgrim said. "I am that," said the monk. "Who is that working on the abbey?" "My monks," said the man. "I am the abbot." "Oh, that's wonderful," the pilgrim said. "It's so good to see a monastery going up." "We're tearing it down," the abbot said. "Tearing it down?" the pilgrim cried. "Whatever for?" "So we can see the sun rise at dawn," the abbot said.<sup>1</sup>

The current chapter of the Parish of St. Matthew's story is all about the conversion of a building so that we can indeed see the sun and the start of a new day.

St. Matthew's Anglican Church is in an inner-city neighborhood in Winnipeg. It was established in 1896 when Winnipeg was the gateway to the west and imagined itself as the Chicago of Canada. At that time, the neighborhood was filled with upwardly mobile working class families of new immigrants from the United Kingdom. In 1944, six months after the parish had paid off its mortgage, the superstructure of the church burnt down. The parish worshiped in the basement and when the soldiers returned from the war, they built a new church on the foundations of the old. Over the next decades many moved to the newly developing suburbs, the church built for twelve hundred people shrank in congregants, and the neighborhood changed around it. In the 1970s St. Matthew's almost sold its building, but the purchase offer was withdrawn at the last minute. Into that vacuum, the parish

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Fire in These Ashes* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 77.

committed itself to mission in and for its neighborhood. The shape of that mission has changed over time, but the commitment has remained firm.

By the opening years of the new millennium, the Sunday worshipping congregation was less than one hundred, the roof leaked in several places, the floor in the active mission area in the lower level was no longer sound, and there were measurable toxic mold and asbestos fibers in the air. Yet, the community development and support work of the congregation and affiliated organizations was flourishing. Fully 85 percent of the use of the building (in terms of people per week) was attributable to Monday-to-Saturday work, which at that time included a twice-a-week food bank, a daily drop-in center, programs for diabetes prevention, community development, after-school recreation, Alcoholics Anonymous, and many community events. By 2004, the parish was at a crossroads. Should it close, or repair and renew? The latter option was only possible if outside funds were available. Because of the centrality of food for much of the mission work and because of the disrepair of the church's main kitchen, the project of renewal began there. Approximately \$110,000 was raised for a new commercial kitchen and conversations were initiated for grants for the renovation of the rest of the lower-level community space and the insulation and replacement of the roof. It was possible to raise the additional \$725,000 necessary for this project from foundations, supporting congregations, and the government because of the relationships and reputation established over thirty-five years of work in and for the community.

By the fall of 2006 the parish had an intact roof and a functional neighborhood resource center, but the challenge of congregational renewal remained. The worship space, although beloved and elegant with beautiful stained glass, pipe organ, and arched wooden roof, was badly water damaged and too large for the current congregation. St. Matthew's no longer had the human or financial capacity to manage and maintain the building. In 2010 it projects an income of \$175,000 (of which 46 percent is from envelope giving) and expenses of \$200,000. It has had an average deficit of \$15,000 per year for at least two decades. St. Matthew's has an average Sunday attendance of sixty-five, which is largely representative of its neighborhood in its diversity and challenges. The parish has relied on ten people for 50 percent of its budget, and seven of the ten are over seventy. In addition, it is

dependent upon a handful of people with the organizational and managerial skills to manage the complex community of agencies and people who call St. Matthew's home.

Yet St. Matthew's remained committed to its ministry of hospitality, community development, spiritual presence, and witness in and for the neighborhood. West Central Winnipeg is poor, transient, and ethnically diverse, with a higher than average number of houses in need of major repair. The human challenges of single-parent families, addictions, mental illness, and lack of living-wage work are significant. Many of our neighbors and parishioners have come to Winnipeg as refugees from other parts of the world or from our northern aboriginal communities. St. Matthew's knows that it has been given its beautiful building through the faithfulness of previous generations, yet needs to divest itself of its managerial responsibilities to survive. What better way to honor its mission than to pass on the gift and develop affordable housing for the families of the neighborhood in the upper floors of its building? St. Matthew's has decided to invite the neighborhood into the church to live, and become itself a tenant in its own building. We will no longer serve our neighbors, but live with them. The headline in our local newspaper was "Church with a heart . . . and homes."<sup>2</sup>

It has taken three years to develop a feasible business plan, building design, and funding strategy for the conversion of the upper floors of St. Matthew's church. The resulting property will include twenty-four units of affordable rental housing for families, a ground level interior courtyard and play area, a new smaller dedicated worship space for the congregation, and the newly renovated neighborhood resource center in the lower level. Construction will begin in October 2010 with occupancy by December 2011. In addition, St. Matthew's Non-Profit Housing Corporation was created in partnership with another nondenominational congregation worshipping at St. Matthew's to hold the mortgage for the development, manage the conversion, and oversee the long-term management of the building. St. Matthew's has given the Housing Corporation a fifty-year lease to the property and upon completion will become a long-term tenant with three representatives on the board of the Housing Corporation.

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<sup>2</sup> Brenda Suderman, "Home Sweet Church," *The Winnipeg Free Press*, April 1, 2007.

This project accomplishes several things: it provides new critically needed affordable rental units for families; the neighborhood retains the space as a community resource; and the congregation can continue its worship and witness in the neighborhood with more feasible financial and managerial obligations. However, this project does not make sense from a market economy point of view. The parish is giving away its property (valued at \$807,000 by city assessment and \$5,792,500 in replacement insurance). It contributes \$200,000 as equity to the residential project, pays an additional \$300,000 to develop new worship space, and becomes a tenant contributing \$1,200 a month in rent to cover worship and some of the neighborhood resource center space. In other words, the parish completely commits its existing assets, forgoes its rental income, and must exist within the parameters of the stewardship of its members.

Analyzed from the perspective of the gift (or manna) economy, however, the project makes considerable sense. Although we live in a market economy, churches are fundamentally rooted in a gift economy. The vast majority of our income comes as gift or freewill offering. Even the state gives church property a different tax status because of its contribution to the public good. Although the vast majority of the goods and services required for this conversion will be purchased in the market economy, the funds will have been obtained through grants from the public sector (government and private foundations) and donations from individuals. Interestingly, none of this would have been possible if St. Matthew's had not received substantial bequests from two single women who had lived very modest lives.

Gift economies work and generate new potential for participants as they are passed on. The three types of increase in a gift economy as described by Lewis Hyde are:

1. the material dimension: people are fed, clothed, warmed, and enriched by the gift itself;
2. the social dimension: the movement of a gift creates and strengthens community and faith in community; and
3. the spiritual dimension: for people of faith, gift-giving is a practical spiritual discipline that deepens our participation in the work of God in Christ in our world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 37. See also Cathy C. Campbell, *Stations of the Banquet: Faith Foundation for Food Justice* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), 160–161.

The material increase for the individual in the first dimension is accompanied by the social and spiritual increase that accrues to the whole in the second and third dimensions. Generosity is not just good for the recipient or for the giver, but builds up the whole. This project takes up my earlier challenge for the church “to re-appreciate the logic of a gift economy and revalue and strengthen our vehicles for collective, as well as individual, generosity.”<sup>4</sup> For as Hyde suggests, fundamental issues are at stake: “Where we maintain no institutions of positive reciprocity [a gift economy], we find ourselves . . . unable to enter gracefully into nature, unable to draw community out of the mass, and, finally, unable to receive, contribute toward, and pass along the collective treasures we refer to as culture and tradition.”<sup>5</sup> So St. Matthew’s, with the permission of the Diocese of Rupert’s Land, is engaging practically in the spirit of radical generosity that is at the heart of the gospel and essential for grace-filled human community.

Much of utmost value in life comes as gift. Air, love, and grace are three preeminent examples. Exchange: “I give you this for that,” although useful in many spheres, is not part of the lexicon of faith. God’s love, God’s grace, God’s action in Christ is offered unconditionally “while we still were sinners” (Rom. 5:8). It is unearned. The conversion that happens when we say “yes” and receive that gift gives us new eyes, ears, hearts, and minds with which to engage the world. Paul captures this logic succinctly:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (Phil. 2:4–6)

The economy of salvation is rooted in this gift economy. Participation in this economy is the doorway into “the mind of Christ,” and the abundance that he came to offer (John 10:10). It is not an abundance that can be possessed or managed, as promised in the prosperity gospel. In the economy of salvation, a gift received must be freely passed on. It stays in motion. This way leads to life in its fullness for all, not just the few.

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell, *Stations of the Banquet*, 161.

<sup>5</sup> Hyde, *The Gift*, 38–39.

From a pastoral perspective, St. Matthew's conversion process incarnates a theology of the cross. It is a profound letting go, a *kenosis* or self-emptying that is dramatically physical as well as deeply spiritual. The congregation struggles with this. Tenderness and patience with all the different expressions of grief is an ongoing part of the process. But we are an Easter people. The new life or new creation of the resurrection happens on the other side of death. Mary Oliver starkly presents this movement in her meditation on a death-dealing Florida crocodile, in which she experiences fear at "such an unleashing / of horror" until she remembers: "death comes before / the rolling away / of the stone."<sup>6</sup> The gift of new life that we celebrate in bread broken and wine poured out for the world becomes acutely tangible when translated into stained glass windows removed, walls stripped, and pews gone for the life of our community. Yet as we live into this conversion process we share experientially in the faith and hope of which we speak and sing in our hymns, Scriptures, prayers, and communion. Their meaning deepens. Interestingly, many people outside the circle of faith can appreciate the scope of the challenge of this conversion and are inspired to see a church dare to live physically the gospel it proclaims.

St. Matthew's housing project is a window into the intertwining of the material, social, and spiritual dimensions that are central to a gift economy. The leadership of the congregation of St. Matthew's is clear that the church is not the building at 641 St. Matthew's Avenue. Many different groups—congregations and community organizations with their own boards and leadership structures—call St. Matthew's home. Yet buildings shape and define us.<sup>7</sup> Our parish thank-you cards, centenary mugs, and many memorial service bulletin covers have a sketch of the building on them. The building is an identity statement. Conscious work to find emotive ways to define our mission and ministry distinct from our building has been critical. A new logo, banners, a parish prayer, and an identity statement all have helped to shape a sense of itself that is not tied to the building. Phrases such as "in the heart of the city, in the heart of God" and "may the streets of our community be holy ground beneath our feet" are part of our written, visual, and prayer life. They encourage the congregation to define itself in terms of an engaged spirituality for and with our neighborhood. In

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2004), 29.

<sup>7</sup> See Timothy J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

addition, developing an acceptance and ease with change, whether in music, the shape of the liturgy, or patterns of governance, has helped to balance the emotive power and stability of the physical structure of the sanctuary. Yet people come to St. Matthew's to remember beloved childhoods, marriages, and funerals. This physical structure is a stable link to the past that the residential project will change. It shapes our worship and predisposes us to sense a transcendent God and our smallness and vulnerability. Will we be able to be as generously inclusive in a very much smaller space? How will our participation in Christ's gift economy reshape our community life? Our journey is unfolding.

Two core aspects of the gospel are front and center for all to see in this project. One is love of neighbor. We are inviting our neighbors not just to come and go from our place, but to actually live with us. We are investing in a part of the city that many fear and have abandoned. Twenty-four units of housing for families will not change our neighborhood, but will change some lives, and signal to the whole the value of the people of our neighborhood. The second aspect of the project is love of God's creation. We are reducing our footprint (the energy we consume per person), increasing the opportunity for people to live decently in the heart of the city (reducing transportation needs), and practicing an ethos of reduce, recycle, reuse. In addition, we are developing a shared earth energy utility to support new housing developments at St. Matthew's and an adjacent seniors' housing complex, as well as updating an aging but important city recreational facility. This will demonstrate that newer energy technologies have a place in the renewal of older neighborhoods. Pursuing respectful relations with all of God's creatures (human and non-human) as well as reducing our profligate consumption of creation is a critical challenge of justice-making in our age. Our practical translation of love of neighbor and creation into architectural, engineering, and economic decisions offer a way to appreciate the radicalness of the gospel anew in our particular context.

In a culture that has put the market economy at the heart of its life, we are creating a mixed economic model: certainly not detached from the market transactions, but also deeply dependent on gift and cooperation. In a culture that has created redundant people and abandoned neighborhoods, we are creating community. In a culture of consumption that is destroying God's beloved creation, we are pursuing a practice of radical generosity and downsizing. Sometimes we do have to take down the monastery to see the sun.

