



Reimagining Assets Vestry Papers July 2023

Positioning Local Faith Communities in a Post-Pandemic World

Bonnie Perry and Anthony Estes

Amid signs of change and decline, church communities sometimes struggle to think in terms of God's grace and abundance. We look at what we have lost, at what we once were, and mourn for the future we cannot envision, our hearts caught up with regrets. If only we had . . . If only people would . . . If only things were like they used to be.

In the video conversation below, Bishop Bonnie Perry from the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan, and the Rev. Anthony Estes, of the [Detroit Church Partnership](#), encourage us instead to explore the powerful what-ifs of where we find ourselves here and now.

Yes, historical identity is important and underpins a community's sense of itself. Of course we want to honor who we have been. But we cannot afford to dwell in what Bonnie calls "the paralyzing anesthesia of nostalgia." Rather, she says, we need to leverage hope into action by discerning what amazing things we are called to do *now* with the gifts God has given us. Or, as Anthony says, to "start anticipating the changes that God is calling us to make and thinking strategically about that."

Strategic thinking *is* faithful thinking. It teaches us to recognize our strengths, notice others' needs, and open ourselves to being transformed by the intersection of the gospel, our church, and our community. The reality is that times are changing. We must give ourselves permission to make the necessary adjustments, and the grace to say, "Well, that didn't work. Now what?"

“You have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to do what you can do. And if we can just organize that and coordinate that, . . . we have so much more to offer our city.” – The Rev. Anthony Estes

View their conversation [here](#).

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry, the first female and first lesbian to be elected bishop in the Diocese of Michigan, holds an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary and a D.Min. from Seabury Western Theological Seminary, specializing in congregational development. Bonnie comes from a Marine family and has lived in California, Hawaii, Virginia, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Chicago, where she served as a parish priest for 27 years. In addition to her work for the Church, she is an internationally recognized sea kayak coach and guide and a frequent contributor to HuffPost. Bonnie lives in Detroit with her spouse, the Rev. Dr. M. Susan Harlow, who is a pastor in the United Church of Christ, and their two dogs, Tali and Owen.

The Rev. Anthony Estes holds an M.Div. from Emory University and was ordained as deacon (December 2018) and priest (June 2019) at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in his native city, Detroit. Anthony now serves The Detroit Church Partnership, acting as Rector of All Saints Episcopal Church; Rector of St. Matthew’s and St. Joseph’s Episcopal Church; and Associate and Partnership Missioner at the cathedral. He also volunteers as a chaplain in the Detroit Police Chaplain Corps. Anthony is married to Brittany, and they cherish their son Jeremiah in loving memory.

Resources:

- [Strategic Thinking for Congregations](#) an ECF webinar presented by Donald Romanik, April 23, 2015
- [Strategic Planning for Your Church](#) an ECF tool

- [Strategic Thinking: How our biases impact our parish's decisions](#) by Erin Weber-Johnson, an ECF Vital Practices blog, May 21, 2015
- [Vision for Impact, Not Just Change](#) by Linda Buskirk, Vestry Papers, July 2014

Reimagining Assets: A Navajo Perspective

Gerlene (GJ) Gordy

This article is also available in Spanish [here](#). Este artículo está disponible en español [aquí](#).

The Western definition of assets does not fit the reality of Indigenous communities, where we include our relationship with the land, intergenerational wisdom, culture and lineage among our community assets. And rather than using our assets to maximize profit, we believe they are an important way to conserve culture for future generations: What assets do we need to be sustainable?

My name is GJ Gordy, and my clans are One Who Walks Around born into the Salt People Clan. My maternal grandparents are the Edge Water People, and my paternal grandparents are the Mud People. That is how I am a Navajo Woman.

We value our connection to land and community

Clanship is essential to Navajo people for greeting and establishing relations. From infancy, we are filled with spirituality by the teachings of our ancestors, passed down through the generations through storytelling.

Our connection to land and community – including the community of all living things – fulfills our spiritual consciousness from birth. It molds our minds to see beyond ourselves, to include

all living things in the community. The most significant assets in Navajoland are our agriculture, our culture, and our rich traditions.

Leveraging our most significant assets helps heal and strengthen our community

Farming and planting have become special projects in Navajoland to help us reimagine community, engagement and spiritual sustainability.

Three gardens exist at three Navajoland missions with a strong driving force to engage community, health and well-being, and storytelling. These gardens create a natural space for intergenerational relationships and exchange. In them, members practice ancient planting techniques; local community members take stake in the development; and visitors from around the country can share in the work. From building to planting, watering and harvesting, clergy and congregations offer prayers during each step. At harvest, the fun happens as we share the bounty and learn traditional and modern recipes.

We cannot be blind to the past – and you are part of our future

The emphasis on passing along intergenerational wisdom is important work because of past atrocities committed against Indigenous communities. As victims, we believe that the process of healing and understanding needs to come, first, by looking to the past, and then by turning to the present and future.

Our history includes witnessing the theft, extraction, and misuse of assets, which has led to impoverished communities, addiction and family dysfunction. To heal, we are strengthening our community bonds and reconnecting with creation through the practice of Hozho (balance, peace, beauty and harmony).

As we move forward in healing, we ask that you join us as members of the beloved community by committing yourself to listening and understanding, and by holding us in prayer. Please pray the Gathering Prayer from the *Indigenous Disciples Prayer Book* from the office of Native American/Indigenous Ministries of the Episcopal Church:

Creator, we give you thanks for all you are and all you bring to us for our visit within your creation. In Jesus, you place the Gospel in the center of this sacred circle through which all of creation is related. You show us the way to live a generous and compassionate life. Give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your spirit, for you are God, now and forever. Amen.

Gerlene Gordy (GJ) is Navajo from Coal Mine, New Mexico. She is the Communication Director for the Episcopal Church in Navajoland (ECN) and a web developer for Cheii's Web (<https://cheiiswebdev.com>) founded by ECN to help share people's stories. GJ has a husband and a nine-year-old daughter. She has worked with children for more than 12 years and enjoys sweet tea on a hot New Mexico afternoon.

Resources:

- [Abundant Love in Scarce Times](#) by Gerlene "GJ" Gordy, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [A Native Sense of Stewardship](#) by Forrest Cuch and Michael Carney, Vestry Papers, September 2020
- [Eco-Justice Lives in the Heart](#) by Marc Andrus, Vestry Papers, March 2022
- [Climate Change, Biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples](#) by Francisco José Duque Gómez, Vestry Papers, March 2022

From Dwindling Congregation to Dynamic Resource

Wyndeth Davis

If your church closed tomorrow, who would notice? And how has this question energized the community of Christ's Episcopal Church, in Calumet, Michigan?

Christ's Episcopal Church was founded in 1893, at a time when the area was home to a thriving copper mining industry that drew immigrants from 23 countries. The original members of Christ's Church emigrated from England and were employed as mine captains, engineers, timbermen, miners, boilermakers and machinists for the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company. Company managers felt that church attendees would be moral, loyal and productive, so the company donated, leased or sold land for churches. Christ's Episcopal was designed by Calumet and Hecla architect Charles W. Whiting in the style of English countryside churches, a bit of home away from home for those of English heritage.

When the mines closed, however, between 1950 and 1970, many people left the area in search of economic well-being, causing church membership to decline. At first, congregational losses were offset by the arrival of newcomers to the area. But the Church's congregation dwindled further as the remaining members began to age and either died or moved to join family in other parts of the country.

Over the past seven years, the Altar Guild became a team of two, and now a guild of one. The number of people available to serve on the Vestry or the Ministry Support Team shrank – and then plummeted with the added pressure of COVID. One of two volunteer priests developed dementia and had to step away. A good attendance day at church meant between four and 13 people.

Too Many Challenges, Too Few People

As the Ministry Support Team, we had to face the facts. One member looked at giving and realized we were maintaining the church primarily through the gifts of four families. If any of these were to stop giving, for any reason, we would no longer be able to support the building.

Ours is a smaller church, located in a part of the country that gets up to 300 inches of snow in winter, and heating and plowing are expensive. On the positive side, we share the building with several recovery groups, which is helpful both to them and to us; their donation is added to other gifts that help keep the heat and lights on. The building is also a historic structure important to the town, located inside Keweenaw National Historical Park.

We didn't want to get rid of our building. We didn't want to stop worshiping. But we were being crushed by the constant struggle to make ends meet. When we discovered moisture in the basement that would require major work, it looked like the end.

Exhausted and Afraid

The Ministry Support Team held many difficult meetings trying to discern a way forward. By last spring, the team included most of the attending congregation, as well as a portion of the Vestry. The same people were filling many roles. We felt obligated. We felt exhausted. We felt if this church failed, we had failed.

We're a ministry-oriented church. We believe that each of us has a ministry recognized in the Baptismal Covenant. It might be the ministry of feeding the hungry, it might be the ministry of dusting – but everyone has a ministry. We did not want to fail in our stewardship of the church or in any of our ministries.

We discussed giving the church building to someone who could use it – to a tribal government, or another organization – but the building would be just as big a burden to them as it was to us. So we kept trying. We got rid of the phone. We cut back every way we possibly could, and it still wasn't enough.

From Neighbors to Possible Partners

We began to look at our neighbors and possible partners. What do we have to offer? We are part of a strong ecumenical union of local churches that provides aid to the community, including a food bank and other ministries serving the broader population. Collaborating lets us reach people more efficiently – but makes it harder for the community to associate the services they receive with a specific church: What do the people in that little brown church do?

Our nearest neighbor is the community art center in a reconditioned church next door. We share yard space with them, and they noticed last summer when we started to meet outside. It felt good for us to be outside of the pressure of the building, under the sun and the trees – and the art center noticed us. They're looking for more space for classrooms, places to meet, places to hold classes. We have that! It might be full of pews, but we have that. Still, plans did not move forward, and the dampness of the basement loomed as a huge financial hurdle.

Generating Ideas

In the fall, exasperated, we decided to meet with the diocese about our options. We requested bids for the cost to fix the foundation of the church, and we gathered information about needs in the community that our church space could fulfill.

We talked about turning the basement of the church into low-cost housing for un-homed people in our area – although the basement was not an inspiring place, and the costs to make it accessible and bring it up to code seemed overwhelming.

We talked about the garden at the art center, a large rose garden next to our yard, and the possibility of creating a labyrinth that would provide a place for people in the community to walk, to be outside, to enjoy the rose garden. It might invite people closer – to let them experience that little brown church in a different way and maybe inspire them to ask a question or two about what happens there.

At the same time, the building that housed our ecumenical food bank raised the rent. The food bank would have to move. If our building could be made accessible as well as watertight, we'd be a great location.

What would happen if . . . ?

As positive as all this sounded, we were still looking at the very real possibility of closing. But we are fortunate in that our diocesan staff believes, as we do, that God has a purpose for Christ's Episcopal Church in Calumet. A team met with us for a hard, honest conversation to talk about our finances, the reality of our challenges and our small congregation.

Then we talked about what could happen if we made some radical changes. What if we could get a donation to begin the work on the foundation? What if we removed the pews from most of the worship space? We could leave the historic fabric of the choir and altar intact and worship there, but open up the rest of the church to make room for new possibilities. This was a compelling idea: When you have a congregation of eight in a space designed for 150, it's challenging to feel that we're really worshipping together.

Just like that, we realized we were not walking alone – and never had been. Suddenly, the way was clear to make some changes and see what happened. We could always try something else, so we decided to try.

Uneasy, Unsettled – And Inspired

What better time to begin preparing for a new way than the first Sunday of Advent? That morning, six people arrived to find pews roped off with wide gold ribbon, our worship space now a small circle of chairs and pews toward the front. To make Eucharist more intimate, we added an altar on the floor in front of the high altar, completing our circle. And not just any altar: This was the original altar that had served the congregation until it was replaced by the large wooden ornamental altar. That first Sunday of Advent, our missionary also introduced a more conversational sermon and changed a few details about "the way we always do things."

Was it frightening? Oh, yes! We were unsettled, a little uneasy. We were not in our accustomed pews. But something else happened, something unexpected and good: We all felt the stirrings of hope, and ever since, we've had a steady core of about eight worshipers on most Sundays. We're not sure whether that is due to the changes or because people are just curious about what else we might try the next week! Even those most attached to their pews have been able to come forward and join us at the front of the church.

Finding Our Way

It has been interesting to watch this community, which seems so averse to change, engage in fundamental changes. The pews will come out this summer, and we have received a donation to fix the foundation. We have applied for grants to make the basement accessible, so it is ready to house the food pantry. We've talked about introducing an indoor labyrinth where the pews currently stand, so community members have a warm place to walk in the winter. We

continue to host recovery meetings and art classes. The space isn't ready yet, and we're already getting requests to use it for a mother's support group and as a community meeting space.

I can't say we are out of the woods. We are not confident that we will be able to pull this off successfully. Yet we are confident that God is in control of what happens here at Christ's Episcopal Church. If this church is meant to be here, it will be here – and if not, we trust that there is another purpose for our community, another place for us to meet, another way for us to fulfill each of our small ministries.

The kind of faith that is moving us forward is not “practical.” A practical solution would be to give up and go home. But we feel it is what the Spirit is leading us to do. By being willing to break open the church building and by listening to the needs of our community – even if those needs are complex and might require us to change – we can open hearts in a community that desperately needs an open and accepting place to worship. We're already hearing from people who are asking questions about the Episcopal Church, what we believe and who is welcome. And that is a great start!

Wyndeth Davis is a member of the Ministry Support Team for Christ's Episcopal Church in Calumet Michigan (Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan), where she is currently a postulant. Born in Seattle Washington and raised in a Methodist/Presbyterian congregation in Oregon's Willamette Valley, Wyndeth came to the Episcopal Church as an adult. She was drawn to the value the church places on all people as beloved community, and the radical welcome practiced by the congregation of Grace Episcopal Church in Brunswick MD, where she was confirmed. Wyndeth devoted her career to the national parks as an archaeologist, an interpretive specialist, and the national coordinator of educational programming, and later interpretive planning. She is currently a national park superintendent. Wyndeth enjoys painting icons, gardening, and is blessed with an amazing son, Nathan.

Resources:

- [Uncovering Hidden Treasure](#) by Demi Prentiss, Vestry Papers, September 2019
- [Strategic Thinking for Congregations](#) an ECF webinar presented by Donald Romanik, April 23, 2015
- [An Asset-based Approach to Engaging Church and Community](#), ECFVP Team, Vestry Papers, January 2022
- [Church with Garden and Food Pantry Seeks Same](#) by Nathan Davis, Vestry Papers, March 2015

From One Small Seed: The Story of Plainsong Farm

Nurya Love Parish

“The earth is the Lord’s.” – Psalm 24:1a

“See, I am making all things new.” – Revelation 21:5

For almost 20 years in ministry, I read these texts, heard them and said them, but when God called me to create a new ministry in and with the Episcopal Church, using property that my family owned, I still had a hard time living by them.

Once upon a time, Plainsong Farm was simply the place where I lived. In 2001, my husband and I bought a former organic farm with 10 acres, one house, and two big barns just north of Grand Rapids, Michigan. I named it Plainsong Farm, but it wasn’t a farm while we lived there. Neither of us was a farmer, and it takes a farmer to make a farm.

As I walked the property in those early years, I felt like we weren't being faithful to it. The land had so much potential, with its fields that had once grown food and its barn that could someday hold people. Our property was small, but I knew small things mattered in God's economy. I also knew that our nation's food system was contributing to ill health for both people and the planet. I knew that Christ was the great healer. And I knew that the place where I lived fit somehow into the story of God's ownership and redemption of all things.

But I didn't know how to make a ministry at the intersection of food, place and faith. I didn't know how to make a ministry with soil and seed and water along with human beings. I didn't know how to make a ministry that proclaimed that the earth is the Lord's, and that God is doing a new thing in this era of climate crisis.

I didn't know how, but God knew how.

"If you do this, I will help"

Plainsong Farm started after I tried and utterly failed to begin it on my own in 2013. That's when I got down on my knees and said to God, "I can't do this, but if you do this, I will help."

From that day forward, God has done it. On July 1, 2014, my husband and I made the Plainsong Farm property available to the Diocese of Western Michigan for a year at no cost, which turned into six years at no cost. I was willing to work without pay to bring it to life. Back then, there were no other people involved in its day-to-day work, no financial assets, no supporting members, no programs, no outcomes.

But God was determined to do a new thing that was an ancient thing: God brought to life a ministry that integrated Scripture texts and open-ended questions, science and prayer, young and old. Nine years later, Plainsong Farm is now a living laboratory for farm-based discipleship.

Our mission is to cultivate connections between people, places and God by making a place that nurtures belonging and the radical renewal of God's world.

Accomplishing the Impossible

Holy Scripture teaches us that from one small seed God can bring forth exponential growth – 20 times, 30 times, a hundredfold. I have seen this with my own eyes at Plainsong Farm. The small seed of faithfulness and a willingness to risk in response to God's call has borne incredible fruit. I can't count how many people's lives God has changed through this ministry. I am sure I don't know them all. And most days it feels like we have barely begun. The things we now count boggle my mind: hundreds of donors, thousands of dollars, hundreds of people who come to the farm in any given year, tens of thousands of servings of fresh produce grown and given. I know I didn't create this growth. It's so far beyond my capacity that it always feels like a miracle.

This past year, my family sold the property on which Plainsong Farm operates to the ministry. It was the culmination of seven years of work: work to create a sustainable revenue stream, work to find others for the staff, work to create a governance system, work to incorporate a new entity in the Episcopal Church (the most difficult aspect of this experience), work to develop an agreement between my husband and the farm ministry's board of directors, work to figure out the financials that would make the sale logical for our family and for the farm ministry.

God has completed every impossible task to bring Plainsong to life, but a lot of people have put in a lot of work to bring Plainsong Farm to life too. It is my privilege to write most of the essays about it to try to explain what God has done, but if Plainsong were mine, it would have collapsed a long time ago.

Of thine own have we given thee

If this is what God can do with a residential property, what can God do if offered the properties that our ancestors sacrificed to build to glorify God in generations past? These places are already dedicated to health and salvation. When we understand that health and salvation are real-world experiences that involve the care of this earth and the people that inhabit it, the possibilities our properties hold are endless.

In 2017, inspired by seeing how God was at work at Plainsong, I started working to gather leaders from other denominations and traditions who understood the opportunities that land holds. The [FaithLands](#) and [ChurchLands](#) initiatives grew out of these first gatherings. They continue to this day, and it's time for this work to grow.

As the church, we are meant to see that this earth is not simply real estate; it is the work of the Lord. Our tradition exists to pass on this truth. How can we practice faith in a way that provides healing to people and planet through the care of places? This question still leads me forward.

Plainsong Farm moves forward only by the grace of God and the gifts of generous donors. You are invited to [learn more](#) and [become a supporting member](#) of the farm.

Nurya Love Parish figured out that God was calling her toward Plainsong Farm in the early 2000s when she mysteriously cried every time she talked about this dream. As the founding Executive Director, Nurya has spent years figuring out next steps uphill on an uncharted path, and now gratefully engages with board, staff, young adults, donors and many partners and friends. Nurya is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, priest in the Episcopal Church, writer and consultant, and on days off she enjoys spending time with family, reading, cooking, or walking in the park near her home.

Resources:

- [Celebration of Life Collect](#), by Carol Bernice, an ECF Vital Practices Tool
- [Sharing the Bounty of God's Garden](#) by Bill Eakins, Vital Practices, November 2018
- [Church with Garden and Food Pantry Seeks Same](#) by Nathan Davis, Vestry Papers, March 2015
- [Peace Garden](#) by David Paulsen; Introduction by Nancy Davidge, Vestry Papers, July 2016

Leveraging Your Congregation's Physical Assets

Ken Howard

What is the state of your congregation these days?

Are your pews half empty on Sundays? Are your property and buildings largely unused? When you rent out building space are you desperately trying to patch holes in your cashflow by renting for activities like wedding receptions, birthday parties, scout meetings, and yoga classes, or other events that don't further your mission?

If you answered yes to these questions, you're not alone. Half of all worship seating in the U.S. goes unused every Sunday, there are more than half a million acres of unused church property, the vast majority of church buildings are empty 85 percent of the time, and most churches rent space opportunistically rather than strategically.

What is your connection to your community?

Between 3,850 and 7,700 churches close every year. And almost all of these are sold opportunistically for things like bookstores, brew pubs, frat houses, laser tag arenas, luxury

condos, restaurants, skateparks, wineries, and other purposes entirely unrelated to the church's vision and mission.

Meanwhile, their surrounding neighborhoods, especially in urban and rural areas, are facing significant challenges, including lack of access to child care, early childhood education, educational support services, high speed internet, food and nutrition, affordable child and maternal health care, senior health care and assisted living, affordable housing, and many other critical services. Many people can no longer afford to live in their own neighborhoods. And yet the nonprofit service organizations that could help them often can't afford to locate there either.

How might strategic thinking help?

We believe that churches can minister more effectively to the neighborhoods they serve, while helping themselves become more vital and sustainable as congregations in the process.

In our work with congregations, we have found that perhaps the most effective strategy is to leverage underused church property and buildings to bring critically needed services into the community and onto their sites.



In an urban or suburban setting, this might look like the illustration at left: A single congregation brings nonprofit organization or governmental agency outposts onto their property and/or into their building to provide a variety of services.

Some might move onto the site or into the building permanently: affordable housing and supported living, childcare services, a community credit union, and a parish nurse. Others, like job training, might have a regular but not permanent presence on the site. Still others, like public health screenings, rather than being onsite, might do pop-up services at a nearby drug store or community center.

In a rural setting, church property, buildings and people might be leveraged in a different way. Perhaps several smaller congregations can consolidate in some form, then use the proceeds from the sale of excess congregational properties to develop the remaining joint property in a way that creates a space for one vital and sustainable congregation and allows them to bring needed services on site.



Or perhaps congregations and clergy can link together in some fashion to create a collaborative regional ministry team that plays to their strengths and leverages their connections without closing any of the current congregations.

You can't do it all — but maybe you can do some

Of course, no congregation has the resources to engage all the needs of their neighborhoods, but God doesn't expect us to. Rather, God asks congregations to study their neighborhoods, learn the story of their neighborhoods, and let God speak to them about their place in that story. This kind of discernment can reveal a vision God is calling them to see, the expansive mission God is calling them to take up, and the services God wants them to invite. And they can

share their findings with surrounding congregations, who might collaborate to bring a different set of organizations and services onto their property.

Congregations also may be able to leverage non-congregational resources in their ecosystem, such as rental, lease, or fee income from services organizations sharing their property; grants from their judicatory or denominational; grants from city, county, state, or federal government; grants from foundations; community bonds, social impact bonds, and more.

And we are here to help

Does leveraging your congregation's physical assets for the sake of your neighborhoods and your mission sound complex and potentially overwhelming? If you said yes, you're absolutely right. It is.

But take heart! You don't have to be the expert on what your neighborhood needs, how your property and building might need to be adapted, or how to negotiate the sometimes byzantine municipal zoning, permitting, and regulatory process.

There are organizations that can guide you. That is why [The FaithX Project](#) recently partnered with [Stewardship Realty](#). We're the experts in data-grounded discernment about your congregation's vitality and sustainability, its strengths and weaknesses, and the missional opportunities and challenges in your neighborhoods. They're the experts in real estate and in negotiating the regulation and process that surround it. And together we can accompany you on this journey together from end to end.

For more information, contact FaithX at info@faithx.net. Or to schedule an appointment for a preliminary discussion, schedule an appointment at kenhoward.youcanbook.me

*The Rev. **Ken Howard** is the founder and executive director of [The FaithX Project](http://www.faithx.net), which helps congregations survive and thrive in challenging times through data-grounded discernment. For more information, visit www.faithx.net or email info@faithx.net.*

Resources:

- [An Asset-based Approach to Engaging Church and Community](#), ECFVP Team, Vestry Papers, January 2022
- [Uncovering Hidden Treasure](#) by Demi Prentiss, Vestry Papers, September 2019
- [Putting Our Buildings to Work](#) by David Robinson, Vestry Papers, September 2019
- [A Tale of Three Buildings](#) by Janet Lombardo, ECF Vital Practices blog, February 18, 2019