



Report on the Future of Immaculate Conception Church

Presented by the Immaculate Conception Adaptive Reuse Advisory Committee

September 2016

1.0 Introduction/Background

Immaculate Conception Church in Harbour Grace is one of the province's most significant historic church buildings. This fine Gothic Revival structure is one of the largest stone churches in the province and one of a fairly small number of remaining stone structures in the province. It is also an important part of the history of Harbour Grace, a testament to the prominence of the community in the 19th and early 20th century and to the Roman Catholic community which built the impressive structure that had, for more than a century, served as a cathedral (the seat of the diocese). For many of the people who were a part of the parish the church is an important symbol of personal and family histories. The church was the scene of many significant aspects of life for parishioners: where they were baptized, married, worshiped, contributed their time and resources and were part of a community of faith. In many ways Immaculate Conception church is the embodiment of community memory and identity.

The church was designated as a Registered Provincial Heritage Structure in 1990 because of its aesthetic, historic and cultural value.

With the closure of the church in 2014, the future of the historic structure was in doubt. While a major effort had been put into restoring the building, significant dollars are still required to complete this work. A leaking roof has caused some damage to the interior of the church and resulted in emergency measures to protect the building in the late fall of 2015. If the building is to be preserved it is important that a plan for its adaptive reuse be put into effect in the near-term and that ongoing efforts to preserve and restore the building continue.

In 2014 the RC Diocese of Grand Falls met with a group of concerned individuals and agreed to the formation of a committee to consider options for the adaptive reuse of Immaculate Conception. The committee members comprised:

Dianne Lee, a facilitator with a family background in Harbour Grace
Jack Rose, a retired educator, local business person, member of the Harbour Grace parish and lifelong resident of the community
Edwina Suley, a retired teacher and local heritage advocate
Jim Kean, a Harbour Grace resident and retired Provincial Court Judge
Jerry Dick, a heritage preservation specialist and former resident of Harbour Grace
Ged Blackmore, a former resident of Harbour Grace, retired educator and music creator/director
Annemarie Christie, a heritage professional with an M.A in Folklore, whose thesis focused on a repurposed church in Twillingate, NL
Greg Mercer, a stone mason resident in Harbour Grace who was involved in the restoration of Immaculate Conception

The mandate of the committee is:

- *To provide advice and make recommendations to the Archdiocese on critical steps for preserving Immaculate Conception and finding a new, sustainable use (short term/long term/responsibilities)*
- *To advance the need to stabilize the church before the coming winter/access funding for stabilization*
- *To undertake research and provide useful information to the archdiocese/community that will advance the long-term preservation of Immaculate Conception:*
 - *Options for adaptive reuse*
 - *Models for undertaking projects of this nature*
 - *Process/organization*
 - *Identify potential funding sources*

2.0 Study Methodology and Consultation

One of the early undertakings of the committee was to research and develop a number of case studies on the adaptive reuse of historic churches across Canada and beyond. The results of this research demonstrated that there is a wide range of possibilities for giving them new life. While many have been turned over to private use as residences, condominiums, offices, restaurants and hotels, some of the most compelling new uses maintain churches in the public domain as libraries, parks, arts centres, among others. These, it could be argued, allow a church building to retain some of its original role as a place where people in a community can come together and as a place that is dedicated to meeting the social and spiritual needs of residents.

Consultation with the community was seen as critical to determining the future of Immaculate Conception for a number of reasons:

- An opportunity to see what good ideas were out in the community that could inform potential new uses for the church building and to gauge what there was an appetite for.
- It was deemed important to have a sense of community ownership for decisions that were made. Even if, at the end of the day, it was decided that a viable new use couldn't be found it was thought to be important to allow the community to be part of the conversation and the process.
- The community would likely play a key role in the work of adapting, restoring and operating the building in the future depending on its new use.

Public consultation consisted of a number of major components:

- 1) An **online survey** which gauged people's opinions about preserving the church and their ideas for its adaptive reuse. It was hosted on the Heritage Foundation NL website. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix I. As of the date of the writing of this

report 112 individuals had responded to the survey. While not a scientific (i.e., random) survey, it demonstrated a very high level of support for preserving and adaptively reusing Immaculate Conception (90% strongly agreed; 4.5% somewhat agreed). The largest number of respondents (33.8%) were from Harbour Grace, followed by 28.2% from the Trinity-Conception region; 24.5% from elsewhere in Newfoundland and Labrador with the remainder of respondents being from Canada or outside of Canada. The results of the survey are listed below. The following statement from one respondent captures the feeling of many about the importance of Immaculate Conception:

The cathedral would become a preserved heritage structure; it is an integral part of the history of the people of Harbour Grace, especially the Roman Catholic residents whose roots dig deep into this historic town. Many residents have, in the past, already invested in this building both figuratively and literally. It is a significant part of many families' lives past and present.

- 2) A focus group session was held in Harbour Grace on July 21 with representatives from stakeholder groups in the town and region. Approximately 30 individuals were invited of which 16 attended. Individuals represented a variety of interests that included: social agencies; tourism; community and business development; community organizations. The purpose of the session was to see what needs existed in the community that would have the potential to be met in an adaptively reused church building. A list of invited individuals/organizations and attendees is found in appendix .
- 3) The ideas for adaptive reuse from the survey and focus group were synthesized and scored by the Adaptive Reuse Advisory Committee based on a number of criteria. These form the core of recommendations for the future reuse of Immaculate Conception.

3.0 Findings

3.0.1 Online Survey

As indicated, there was overwhelming support for preserving and finding a new use for Immaculate Conception. Only 5.5% of respondents strongly disagreed with preservation. The range of reasons respondents provided for their responses included:

- Important historical/architectural landmark
- A place that holds memories and significance for parishioners and residents
- Too much of the community's/province's heritage has already been lost
- Potential of building to be a catalyst for community renewal and tourism development
- Concerns were expressed about the building not becoming a financial burden

The responses for the types of adaptive reuses that respondents would support were as follows:

1. Arts and cultural uses – 88.2%
2. Tourism – 81.8%
3. Rentals (weddings, conferences, etc) – 71.8%
4. Educational uses – 67.3%
5. Support business/community enterprise – 48.2%
6. Support community needs – 46.4%
7. For private business/social enterprise – 38.2%
8. None of the above uses – 5.5%

It would appear from the above that the greatest support is for uses that would maintain broad community use of/access to the church building as opposed to using it for private business purpose. Additional potential new uses not identified in the survey included:

- A business/craft incubator that would provide low cost rental space and business support to encourage business development in the community
- A central church for a variety of denominations
- A museum/interpretation centre on the history of Harbour Grace
- A market space for local crafts and food items in support of local agricultural and craft production
- A Lifestyle Centre that provides a variety of services to the community that support community wellness (yoga, meditation, workshops)
- Gardens: both community gardens to support local affordable food and ornamental gardens for strolling, tourists, to support meditation
- Business condo (office and meeting space for rent)
- Remove the roof and treat as a ruin (e.g., garden, outdoor interpretation, outdoor performances)

3.0.2 Focus Group Findings

This session took a somewhat more focused approach with participants being asked to respond to a few particular questions that addressed the potential of Immaculate Conception to meet community wellness/social needs, as a vehicle to support community development and to meet cultural needs. A copy of the focus group questions can be found in Appendix II. A number of new ideas or points were raised that had not come up in the online survey.

Meeting Community/Social Needs

- Any considerations of community wellness need to consider the new arena which will focus on a variety of recreational and physical wellness programs – perhaps use the term “lifestyle centre” so as not to confuse the two.

- Consideration may be given to including the adjacent historic stone courthouse in any future development of Immaculate Conception. It has been closed for the last year or so and it is unclear what the Provincial Government's plans for the building are.
- The significant parcel of land surrounding the church is an important resource and offers considerable potential for development.
- There was considerable discussion around gardening on the property that could encompass a number of different components:
 - Community gardening in support of local, healthy food – also to supply local food banks
 - Could tie a community garden into the greenhouse available at the adjacent St. Francis School
 - Could include a culinary/cooking component to gardening efforts (in support of healthy eating/tourism) and tie into the CNA's commercial kitchen facility/program in Carbonear
 - Garden where people can harvest and process fruit/edible ornamental gardens and orchards and learn about growing and processing garden produce
- A multi-purpose facility that draws in all walks of life
- There is a need for second stage housing that supports individuals moving out of shelters (women and youth were identified) as well as life skills development/training. The latter could be tied into gardening/food production and/or social enterprise at the church
- The example of Buckfast Abbey in the UK was mentioned as an example of a church that was sold to a group of monks who operate it as a social enterprise that sustains the building through the production and sale of honey and apple cider.
- A meditation retreat centre

As a Support for Economic and Business Development

- Making space available for craft outlets and small production/retail businesses along with displays and galleries – to provide low-cost space for new entrepreneurs
- Teaching and learning centre for stone masonry
- Benefits of combining business and arts functions/activities

Arts and Culture

- Collect and tell the stories of the church using the arts as a vehicle (theatre, etc.) as a way to build interest in Immaculate Conception and emphasize its important role in the community
- Organize an annual festival that uses the church facility. Such an event could help to build profile for the building and possibly generate some operating revenue for it.
- Host a variety of summer camps targeted to children/youth/adults that could generate revenue

- Develop as a multi-purpose arts space with modern upgrades and retrofits – possibly include a recording and sound studio

Participants were asked to rank the key uses identified in the online survey as a final activity. Perhaps, not surprisingly – given the makeup of the group – their rankings were somewhat different than the online survey:

1. Arts and cultural uses
2. To meet community, social and wellness needs
3. To support business and community enterprise
4. For private business or social enterprise
5. For tourism
6. For educational uses
7. For rentals

3.0.3 Advisory Committee Analysis

As indicated, members of the committee scored ideas put forward according to the following criteria:

- Respect for heritage integrity of the building
- A catalyst for community well-being
- Potential to generate revenue to cover operational expenses
- Ability to attract community/donor support for capital development
- Ability to attract government support for capital development (i.e., through funding programs)

Rankings in order of priority of major reuse ideas:

1. Arts centre
2. Market space for sale of local agricultural, food and craft production
3. Lifestyle centre that provides a variety of services that supports individual and community wellness (either through leasing space to service providers or through fees for services)
4. Rental venue for weddings, conferences, etc.
5. Business and craft incubator (provide low cost space for small business start-ups)
6. Community gardening
7. Provide services for people with special needs in the community
8. Museum/interpretation centre
9. Central multi-denominational church
10. Lease or sale to private business (including as business condo)
11. Remove roof and treat as ruin (e.g., garden, outdoor interpretation and performance space)

In their discussions the committee identified a couple of other critical factors, in addition to the criteria used for scoring potential adaptive reuse ideas, that need to be considered when identifying new uses for the church:

- Competitive impacts on other facilities in the region. The use of the church exclusively as an arts centre, for example, could negatively impact other arts facilities in the region and an ability to attract capital funding. The building must complement and not compete.
- The need for stand-alone cultural facilities to attract on-going government support which will likely be a serious challenge in the current fiscal climate.

One of the most significant points that came out of the focus group discussion is the land around the church as an important resource that has the potential for development that can contribute to its financial viability.

Recommendations

The Immaculate Conception Adaptive Reuse Advisory Committee recommends that the church remain as a publically-accessible building that meets a variety of needs. This supports the public feedback received during the consultation. This is seen as desirable from a number of perspectives

- The building was built by the community
- It has meaning to members of the parish and the community as a whole
- Using the property to meet a variety of community social, cultural and economic needs is seen as allowing the church to continue its role in providing for the needs of the community and to providing a variety of revenue streams to support its ongoing operation and maintenance.

Proposed Uses:

- Operate the property as a multi-purpose facility that: has a number of different revenue streams; maximizes opportunities for the public to visit and use the building; and supports the community's development and well-being (social, cultural, spiritual, economic). Below is a scenario that is seen as offering uses that are both complementary and that offer the best potential for sustainability:
- Complete the restoration of Immaculate Conception and upgrade all services to modern standards. This could include installing "green energy" features that will make the building environmentally and financially sustainable. A firm with specialized expertise in heritage preservation should undertake an assessment of the building.
- Develop the interior space in a way that maximizes its flexibility to accommodate a wide variety of uses that would include:
 - Rentals for weddings, conferences, meetings and other large functions
 - Food and craft markets on weekends

- Workshop space (for various activities that support community wellness such as yoga, healthy eating, meditation)
- Arts activities like concerts, theatre and visual arts.
- Programs to meet special needs in the community (training, meeting space)

The development of flexible seating and divider systems would be helpful in easily accommodating a variety of functions

- Develop gardens around the building that could serve a number of functions:
 - Ornamental garden to attract locals and visitors (e.g., to provide an attractive venue for people to take wedding photos)- a component could include a contemplative garden
 - Community garden with provision of plots for residents or groups that meet family and community needs for healthy, local food. These would be available for a fee
 - Food producing gardens could open up opportunities for social enterprise that could form part of the economic model for the church (e.g., secondary food processing, learning vacations about growing and cooking local food)
 - If deemed feasible, develop additional infrastructure on the site as part of a second phase that could include space for stage 2 housing for people with special needs
- Rather than developing the building as a stand-alone museum weave interpretation into the other uses of the building through innovative approaches that could include: telling stories through the visual and performing arts; interior and exterior interpretive panels; use of electronic means for conveying historical information (e.g., through personal phones). This could complement other museums in the community and would not result in the substantial costs of staffing a museum and managing an artifact collection.
- Develop an annual festival that will build and maintain profile for the church and will have the potential to generate operating revenues. Such a festival should utilize the innate character and nature of the church such as its beautiful architecture and acoustics (e.g., music) and the history and stories of the church and of Harbour Grace.
- Explore options for public-private partnerships in which the private sector could lease space on the site and/or provide services. Discussions with the owners of Yellow Belly Brewery (which had explored purchasing the building) and, recently, with a private business person who had looked at the church, suggest that it would be very difficult for a private operator to recoup the capital investments required in the building. A community-based organization would have the best chance of securing government funds and raising funds from the community to undertake the significant capital investments required.