

Advancing Faith-Based Land Acquisition for Affordable Housing: Religious Property Decision-Making and Site Evaluation in Essex County



April 10, 2025

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Project: Building Evidence for Successful Faith-Based Land Sales in Essex County

In Spring 2025, the Urban Action Lab partnered with Habitat for Humanity of Essex County to explore opportunities for acquiring faith-owned land to support affordable housing development. This project investigates how different religious traditions approach the sale of property and assesses potential faith-owned sites across Essex County.

The purpose of this effort is to:

1. Explain the process of purchasing faith-owned land across various religious traditions, including Catholic, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and United Methodist
2. Provide a framework to guide future partnerships with faith-based organizations in support of affordable housing goals

The Joseph E. Corcoran Center for Real Estate and Urban Action

Boston College's Corcoran Center aims to develop the next generation of ethical real estate professionals by educating and inspiring students, alumni, and other key stakeholders so they may harness real estate as a catalyst for needed change in areas where the marginalization of vulnerable citizens is most severe and enact broad scope solutions to neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. The Center develops curriculum and promotes access to traditional classroom learning, with real estate courses developed by the Center; experiential learning that engages students in practical, meaningful learning experiences; on-campus engagement that invites students to join a network of professionals and experts in the fields of real estate and urban revitalization; and neighborhood engagement that creates opportunities for multiple disciplines to engage in place-focused neighborhood strengthening.

Urban Action Lab

This semester-long class provides students with first-hand experience working on projects that advance affordable housing and access to opportunity. Students develop and pursue research projects in partnership with mission-driven organizations. Each project is completed in collaboration with a partner organization and is selected based on its potential for high-impact contribution. Project components include research, evaluation, interviewing, and writing. Students collaborate closely with partner agencies, the teaching team, and fellow students.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Part A - Overview of Religious Trends	4
Part B - Religious Property Acquisition Across Faiths	6
Religion #1: Catholicism	8
Religion #2: Judaism	10
Religion #3: Unitarian Universalism	11
Religion #4: American Baptist Church	12
Religion #5: United Church of Christ	13
Religion #6: Episcopal Church	14
Religion #7: United Methodist Church	16
Appendix	18
Item 1: Raw Notes from Interview with Kathryn Ostertag	18
Item 2: Raw Notes from Interview with Jeffrey Sacks	20
Item 3: Raw Notes from Interview with Joel Miller	21
Item 4: Raw Notes from Interview with Bill Grogan	22
Item 5: Raw Notes from Interview with Chris Wendell	26
Item 6: Raw Notes from Interview with Steve Abdow	26
Item 7: Raw Notes from Interview with Jay Williams	27
Item 8: Raw Notes from Correspondence with James Sinclair	29

Executive Summary

Report Overview: This report analyzes land availability and property decision-making processes among seven major religious denominations in Essex County. The primary goal of this report is to assist Habitat for Humanity Essex County's staff in understanding how to interact with leadership for different religious denominations in order to increase the probability of faith-based land sales or donations in the future. The Urban Action Lab team conducted interviews with religious leaders from each denomination to better understand the local, regional, and national governance structures that influence decisions relating to property sales and to verify the insights presented in this report.

Denominations of Interest: The Urban Action Lab focused on seven denominations that have the largest physical presence in Essex County. The denominations outlined in this report are as follows:

- Catholicism
- Judaism
- Unitarian Universalism
- American Baptist
- United Church of Christ
- Episcopal Church
- United Methodist Church

Part A - Religious Trends: This section begins by presenting evidence on current trends in religious participation. Notably, many denominations are currently experiencing declines in membership and are thus looking to downsize physical properties. Therefore, understanding how to effectively engage different denominations in land sale or donation discussions is especially timely for Habitat for Humanity Essex County, given that many faith-based organizations are looking for ways to continue engaging in their service-based missions while downsizing physical operations.

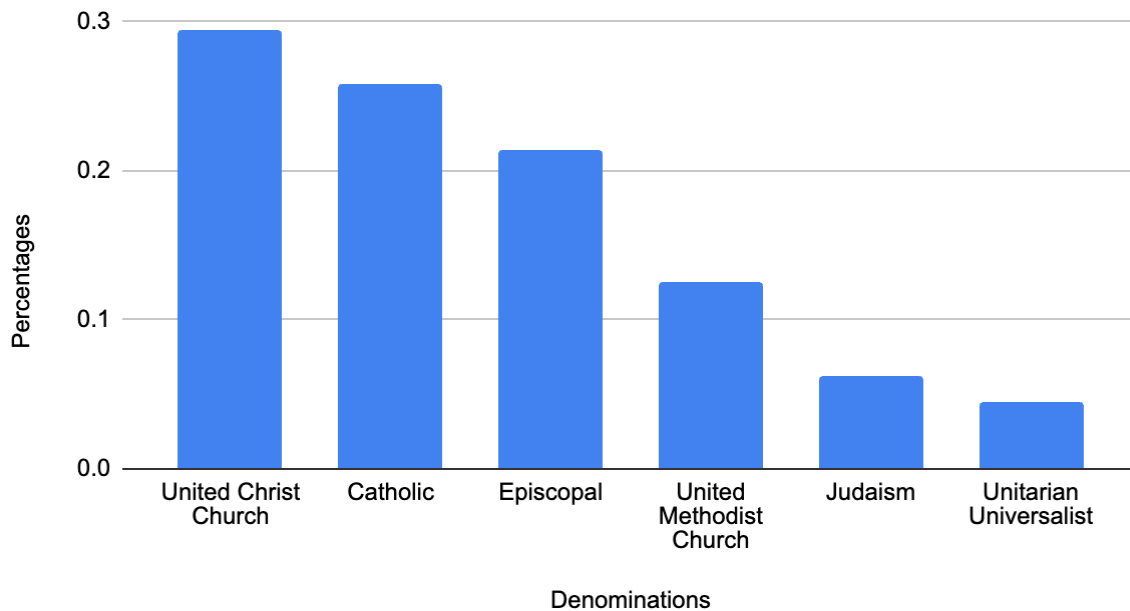
Part B - Religious Property Acquisition Across Faiths: This section provides an overview of the seven major denominations in Essex County, focusing on providing a general overview about the mission, values, and beliefs of each denomination, followed by details on that denomination's land sale decision-making process, local and regional governance structures, key trends, and next steps for engaging these denominations in practice.

Ultimately, this report equips HHEC with actionable insights on how to navigate land transactions with religious organizations by highlighting denominational differences, enabling a more personalized and effective outreach strategy.

Part A - Overview of Religious Trends

Land Availability in Essex County: The Urban Action Lab compiled a list of religious properties located within Essex County. Based on the data, the United Church of Christ (UCC) holds the largest share of land in Essex County, followed by the Catholic and Episcopal Churches. In contrast, Unitarian Universalist and Jewish congregations own a small yet still significant portion of land assets in the region, as shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: Land Availability by Religious Denominations



Religious Participation Trends: Religious affiliation in the United States has been steadily declining, especially when it comes to Christianity. Between 2023 and 2024, 62% of Americans identified as Christian, a 16-point drop¹ from 2007. At the same time, nearly 30% of adults now say they have no religious affiliation, almost double the percentage from 2007. This shift is largely influenced by younger generations and changing cultural values². Participation in church services, Bible studies, and community-based religious programs has also reached record lows³. While faiths like Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism have seen modest growth or demographic changes, the overall trend across the country points to a decline in religious participation.⁴

¹ Pew Research Center. (2025a, February 26). *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. has slowed, may have leveled off*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>

² Pew Research Center. (2025b). *Religious Landscape Study: United States*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/region/united-states/>

³ Pew Research Center. (2022, September 13). *Modeling the future of religion in America*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

⁴ Pew Research Center. (2025a, February 26). *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. has slowed, may have leveled off*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/>

Massachusetts mirrors this national trend, and in some ways, shows it even more clearly. From 2007 to 2023–2024, the share of adults in the state identifying as Christian dropped by 22 points to 52%, Catholicism was still the largest group at 30%.⁵ Other religions grew slightly to a combined 11%, while the number of religiously unaffiliated people rose sharply. The Catholic Church in Boston has especially struggled, losing half of its members since 2000 and closing over 100 parishes.⁶ Protestant denominations like the Methodist and Baptist churches are also dealing with shrinking congregations, budget issues, and church closures, particularly in rural areas. Still, groups like Unitarian Universalists and Muslims are seeing some signs of growth or stabilization.⁷

Overall, the religious landscape in both the U.S. and Massachusetts is changing quickly. Fewer people are identifying with or actively practicing traditional religion, driven by a mix of generational shifts, cultural change, and challenges within religious institutions themselves. With these changing dynamics, the Urban Action Lab team expects that more religious institutions will be interested in land sale or donation in the future. The current religious landscape thus presents an opportunity for Habitat for Humanity Essex County to strengthen local relationships with faith-based organizations and to make HHEC top-of-mind if these religious organizations decide to sell or donate land later down the line.

⁵ Pew Research Center. (2024). *Religious Landscape Study: Massachusetts*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/state/massachusetts/>

⁶ South Coast Today. (2025, March 25). *MA residents are becoming less religious, according to poll*.

<https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2025/03/25/ma-residents-are-becoming-less-religious-according-to-poll-see-stats/82632893007/>

⁷ Pew Research Center. (2017). *U.S. Muslim population continues to grow*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/03/muslim-population/>

Part B - Religious Property Acquisition Across Faiths

This section provides detailed information to guide land acquisition efforts for religious institutions within the seven major denominations in Essex County: Catholicism, Judaism, Unitarian Universalism, American Baptist, the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church.

Here is a summary of the Urban Action Lab team's recommendations on engaging religious leaders in land acquisition conversations for each of the seven denominations:

Denomination	Land Acquisition Decision-Making Process	Next Steps & Engagement Recommendations
Catholicism	The Catholic Church employs parish-level decision-making with oversight from the Archdiocese's Real Estate Office .	Reach out to local pastors to inquire about potential land acquisition by HHEC. Engaging with Catholic Churches generally has a longer timeline, given that local churches must go through regional-level processes with the Archdiocese of Boston.
Judaism	Synagogue leadership makes the decision locally .	The best points of contact are the local rabbi, board, and committee members of each synagogue.
Unitarian Universalism	The Unitarian Universalist church operates on a local basis , with each congregation making their own decisions on leadership, financing, and land sale and acquisition decisions.	The best point of contact for land sale inquiries is the minister of a congregation . However, if a congregation is declining in membership and close to dissolving, they may not have a minister. In this instance, the best point of contact is the chairperson and/or board members .
American Baptist	The American Baptist church operates on the local level and are not required to attain higher denominational	The best point of contact for land sale inquiries is the minister of a congregation . If time allows, a reverend

	approval except for rare circumstances where they have signed a prior agreement with the region (TABCOM, for instance) that placed some requirements on the congregation before it can sell its property.	interviewed in the research process recommended sending physical letters not only to the minister, but also to the chair of the Board of Trustees and the church moderator.
United Church of Christ	UCC churches are led at the local level and are not required to consult higher leadership regarding land decisions. The local pastor works alongside the local Council of each individual church to coordinate efforts regarding land sales or donations.	Reach out to local pastors at individual churches in Essex County to inquire about potential land acquisition by HHEC. UCC churches are expected to have shorter processes for land acquisition, given that they have full local autonomy and do not need to navigate regional processes to move forward.
Episcopal	The Episcopal church governs land decisions through a structured approval process. Any sale, acquisition, or encumbrance of church property—such as consecrated churches, chapels, parish houses, or rectories— requires written consent from both the Bishop and the Standing Committee. Exceptions exist for internal transfers within diocesan entities or unrestricted property. If a property does not fall under these restrictions, it may be sold or used without diocesan approval, provided a certified statement confirms its unrestricted status.	Contact Episcopal Diocesan Offices . Typically property sales from the Episcopal Church occur following the closure of a congregation or the sale of underutilized land. In general, the Diocesan Offices are the point of contact for inquiries about purchasing parcels of land. Very rarely, an active congregation will look to sell land.

United Methodist Church	A local church holds property in trust for the United Methodist Church. All material information regarding land availability and size is contained at a local level and is accessible to the clergy. Finalizing the sale requires both regional and local-level approval.	Contact United Methodist Churches locally , focusing on reaching out to lead pastors.
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Religion #1: Catholicism

Description of Religion:

Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity and is centered on the belief in one God expressed as the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the authority of the Church, especially the Pope, as well as the importance of tradition alongside Scripture. Key practices include the seven sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, which is central to Catholic worship. Catholics also honor the Virgin Mary and the saints, believing they can pray to God for believers. Catholicism teaches that salvation comes through both faith and good works, and it strongly promotes social justice, compassion, and service to others.⁸

Overview of Decision-Making:

- **Parish-Level Decision-Making**

The process begins at the parish level, where the pastor, in agreement with the church and its followers, determines whether to pursue a property transaction such as a sale or ground lease. Once the decision is made, the pastor approaches the Archdiocese of Boston's Real Estate Office to begin the formal process. The parish works with the Real Estate Office to engage a broker, conduct an appraisal, and market the property, with the goal of balancing financial return and the Church's mission. This balance becomes especially important when considering projects like affordable housing, which may yield a lower financial return but strongly align with the Church's values. In these cases, mission oriented outcomes are often prioritized over profits.

- **Archdiocesan-Level Oversight**

Once offers are received, they are reviewed by both the parish and the Real Estate Office. A recommendation is then made to the Archdiocesan Finance Council, which consists of real estate professionals who assess the proposal's viability. From there, the recommendation is forwarded to the College of Consultors—a group of clergy who advise the Archbishop of Boston. After review, the Archbishop typically gives final approval. However, the entire process remains rooted in the authority and advocacy of the local pastor.

- **Community Partnerships and Mission Alignment**

In cases where local organizations such as Habitat for Humanity are interested in Church-owned land, they are first encouraged to contact the pastor directly. Local support is essential before the Archdiocese will consider a proposal. Most projects proceed as long-term ground leases—usually 75 to 99 years—as outright sales are rare and would require a compelling justification. The Archdiocese is currently engaged in several such negotiations, including a parish in Whalen that is working to develop excess land for affordable housing.

- **Timeline and Trends**

⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (n.d.). *What is the Catholic Church?* <https://www.usccb.org>

The timeline for a Church property transaction can vary widely, typically taking between 12 to 24 months. While sales are possible, the Church strongly prefers ground leases, making full sales less common unless clear, mission-aligned reasoning is provided.⁹

- **Who to Contact/Next Steps**

If an individual is serious about inquiring into a piece of church-owned land, their first step should be to contact the local pastor directly, rather than filling out one of the general inquiry forms commonly found on church websites, which may delay the process. The goal of the initial conversation is to understand what the church hopes to achieve through the sale. Some churches are selling land to generate funds for other investments, while others are doing so to further the Church's mission.

Depending on the conversation with the pastor, if the individual decides to move forward with the purchase, the pastor will then contact the Archdiocesan Real Estate Office, which will initiate the next steps, such as engaging an appraiser and beginning the appraisal application process.

⁹ Interview, 4/14/25 Bill Grogan, President of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs Archdiocese of Boston

Religion #2: Judaism

Description of Religion:

Judaism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, centered on a covenant between God and the Jewish people. Its teachings are rooted in the Torah, and Jewish life is guided by religious law (halakha), tradition, and a strong emphasis on community. Worship and learning often take place in synagogues, and practices include observing the Sabbath, celebrating festivals, and following dietary laws. Ethical living, justice, remembrance, and education are core values within the faith.

Overview of Decision-Making:

- **Local Synagogue Authority**

Each synagogue operates independently, with land sale and acquisition decisions made at the local level. The governing body—typically a Board of Directors—works closely with the rabbi, and sometimes social action committees or the full membership, depending on the synagogue's bylaws. While structures vary slightly, the decision-making process is generally consistent across the country and across denominations.

- **Congregational Involvement**

In some cases, major decisions require a vote of the congregation, especially when tied to the future of the community or use of religious space. Regardless of location—East Coast, West Coast, or elsewhere—the process typically involves collaboration between clergy and lay leaders, with the rabbi and board serving as primary contacts for land inquiries.

- **Case-by-Case Process**

Because there is no central authority overseeing all synagogues, outreach must be made directly to each community. Each land transaction is handled independently, making localized engagement critical.

- **Who to Contact/Next Steps**

Because synagogues make decisions locally, contacting the rabbi, board, and/or committee members of each synagogue should be the initial step.

Religion #3: Unitarian Universalism

Description of Religion:

Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a liberal religious tradition that emphasizes individual freedom, spiritual exploration, and shared values such as equity, compassion, and justice. It draws on many sources, including world religions, humanist teachings, and personal experience. There is no required creed; instead, members are encouraged to form their own beliefs while working together toward common ethical goals. UU congregations often support social justice efforts and community engagement.

Overview of Decision-Making:

- **Congregational Autonomy**

UU congregations are fully self-governing. There is no centralized authority that mandates decisions, including those involving land sales or acquisitions. While the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) provides general guidance, each congregation independently manages leadership, finances, and property matters.

- **Local Leadership and Process**

Land sales are typically handled by the minister in collaboration with the board of trustees or congregational chairperson. If the congregation has dissolved or lacks a minister, board members are the main points of contact.

- **Primary Motivations and Timeline**

Most UU property sales occur when a congregation is dissolving, with timelines usually ranging from six months to a year. However, some active congregations have pursued creative redevelopment partnerships, such as mixed-use developments with classrooms, commercial spaces, and residential units. These opportunities often arise in urban areas where property values are high. Given that many UU members lack a business background, partnerships and external collaboration are key to successful land use.

- **Who to Contact/Next Steps**

The best initial point of contact for land sale inquiries is the minister of a congregation. However, if a congregation is declining in membership and close to dissolving, they may not have a minister. In this instance, the best point of contact would be the chairman and/or board members.

Religion #4: American Baptist Church

Description of Religion:

The American Baptist Church is a Protestant Christian denomination that emphasizes personal faith, believer's baptism, and the autonomy of the local church. Grounded in the authority of Scripture and the belief in the priesthood of all believers, Baptists hold that each person has the freedom and responsibility to interpret the Bible and live according to its teachings. Worship varies widely across congregations, but often centers on preaching, prayer, and music. Baptist theology values individual conscience, community service, and democratic participation in church life.

Overview of Decision-Making:

- **Local Autonomy and Democratic Governance**

American Baptist churches operate independently, with each congregation holding full authority over its own governance and property decisions. Most major decisions, including land sales, are made through a democratic vote of the congregation, typically during regular or special business meetings. Smaller congregations often maintain a fully participatory model, while larger ones may delegate limited authority to boards, committees, deacons, or elders, depending on their bylaws. Still, voting members retain the right to reclaim decision-making power at any time.

- **Congregational Structure and Point of Contact**

Each congregation defines who qualifies as a voting member, and decisions may sometimes be made by a church council or board of trustees within a preset dollar limit. For property matters, the best points of contact are usually the pastor, the moderator, and the chair of the board of trustees. Outreach to all three is encouraged when inquiring about land use or sale opportunities.

- **Associational and Regional Context**

Though congregations are autonomous, they may affiliate with larger bodies like TABCOM (The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts), which provides guidance but does not impose legal control. Churches voluntarily enter into "covenants of relationship" with these bodies, and may leave at any time without repercussion. In rare cases, prior agreements with regional organizations may impose conditions on property sales, and churches may be subject to deed restrictions, especially if land was donated or designated for a specific use.

- **Timeline and Trends**

The timeline for a property sale or redevelopment can take a year or more, depending on the complexity of the land's legal status, including bylaw requirements, deed research, or state law compliance. While financial return is considered, mission alignment often plays a role in decision-making. Some Baptist churches have sold land for affordable housing or nonprofit uses, particularly when such projects reflect the congregation's values.

- **Who to Contact / Next Steps**

The best initial contacts are to reach out to the local pastor at each individual church to inquire about interest in land sales or donations, or the moderator, and the chair of the board of trustees. A minister that the Urban Action Lab team interviewed recommended sending letters to all three, in separate envelopes, so that would be the ideal form of outreach if time permits. If talks progress with a church, it may be important to know that all decision-making power lies in the voting members of a congregation, and they sometimes allocate power to other groups or individuals to handle tasks. However, they can always reclaim that power for themselves.

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Religion #5: United Church of Christ

Description of Religion:

The United Church of Christ was founded in 1957 in Cleveland, Ohio through the union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church with the Congregational Christian Churches. The UCC has established a positive reputation for its efforts in advocating for racial justice, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ inclusion in the religious landscape. It has approximately one million members in 5,000+ congregations across the U.S.¹⁰ With a decentralized structure, each congregation governs itself while remaining connected to other churches through regional-level conferences.

Overview of Decision-Making:

- **Congregation as Center of Power:**

The congregation at each local church represents the core of the United Church of Christ, so major decision-making stems from an agreement of the people of the specific church of interest. Specifically, Community UCC, a church in Raleigh, North Carolina, specifies that "In United Church of Christ polity, the basic unit of governance is the congregation," and "[t]he congregation makes its own decisions about our shared life, our goals, and how we allocate our resources" (Community UCC).¹¹ Notably, decisions on land sales are made by a local-level Council for a specific church based on the wishes of the congregation, and churches do not need to inform the broader conference about land-related decisions.

- **Role of Local-Level Church Boards & Committees:**

In general, after the congregation makes the major decision as a team, a leadership council is formed or called upon at the local church level to carry out the day-to-day tasks of carrying the decision forward. The Southern New England Conference UCC specifies that many potential committees can be formed at the local level, ranging from a general leadership council to mission/outreach committees and budget committees.¹² These committees would then work in tandem to carry out the task of selling or donating land to a developer.

- **Timeline and Trends:**

Most UCC property sales occur when a congregation is dissolving. Given the decentralized nature of UCC churches, the timeline is generally quicker as UCC churches do not need to go through a long process of higher-level approvals from regional or national conferences. Rather, UCC churches have full control and can move the process along given that its decisions are concentrated at the local level. According to Kathryn Ostertag, many UCC churches are shifting away from building-centric worship due to declining attendance.¹³ Additionally, UCC churches

¹⁰ Ciba, M. (2017, January 5). *How does the UCC Live The Gospel of Jesus christ?*. Southern New England Conference of the UCC.

<https://www.sneucc.org/postdetail/how-does-the-ucc-live-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ-7214586>

¹¹(2025). *Governance*. Community UCC. <https://communityucc.org/governance/>

¹²(2025). *Church Teams, Boards, & Committees*. SNEUCC.

<https://www.sneucc.org/church-teams-boards-committees>

¹³ Ostertag, K. (2025, April 1). Interview by Kristin Myer. [Personal interview]. Southern New England Conference, Director of Community Relations.

generally prefer to sell to nonprofit or mission-aligned organizations, making individual outreach to UCC churches a seemingly worthwhile endeavor for HHEC.

- **Who to Contact / Next Steps:**

The best initial contact is to reach out to the local pastor at each individual church to inquire about interest in land sales or donations. Additionally, HHEC should be aware of the leadership structure at UCC churches. Local UCC churches have a local team called the “Council” that is “elected to carry out the business and mission of the church between congregational meetings.”¹⁴ Notably, the Council “makes decisions, authorizes expenditures, facilitates and evaluates the programs and purposes of the church and votes on personnel.”¹⁵ If a UCC church wants to move forward with working alongside HHEC, HHEC will likely work with a variety of leaders who are a part of the local Council.

¹⁴(2025). *Church Teams, Boards, & Committees*. SNEUCC.

<https://www.sneucc.org/church-teams-boards-committees>

¹⁵Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries. (2005). *Governing Board Member*. United Church of Christ. <https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/b5.pdf>

Religion #6: Episcopal Church

Description of Religion: The Episcopal Church is Protestant denomination within the Global Anglican Communion, known for its balance of tradition, inclusivity, and local autonomy. Emphasizing the roles of bishops, priests, and laypeople, it maintains a liturgical worship style rooted in the Book of Common Prayer. The church values open theological exploration, individual conscience, and social justice, often embracing progressive stances on issues like LGBTQ+ inclusion and racial equity. The Episcopal Church has 1.6 million members world-wide and operates in 22 countries.¹⁶

Overview of Decision-Making

- **Diocesan-Level Decisions:**

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts governs land decisions through a structured approval process. Any sale, acquisition, or encumbrance of restricted church property—such as consecrated churches, chapels, parish houses, or rectories—requires written consent from both the Bishop and the Standing Committee. Exceptions exist for internal transfers within diocesan entities or unrestricted property. If a property does not fall under these restrictions, it may be sold or used without diocesan approval, provided a certified statement confirms its unrestricted status.¹⁷

- **Mission Alignment and Land Sales:**

The criteria for determining whether to approve a sale or not is developed on a case-by-case basis. A market-rate financial return is a key factor, however, and the Diocese prefers that a land sale must also support mission-driven projects. In particular, sales to affordable housing non-profits or other faith-based organizations are encouraged, as they align with the Episcopal Church's social justice values.¹⁸

- **Who to Contact/Next Steps:**

The best place to contact would be the Episcopal Diocesan Offices. Typically property sales from the Episcopal Church occur following the closure of a congregation or the sale of underutilized land. In general, the Diocesan Offices are the point of contact for inquiries about purchasing parcels of land. Very rarely, an active congregation will look to sell land. However, such sales

¹⁶<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/organizations-affiliations/anglican-communion/#:~:text=The%20Episcopal%20Church%20is%20part,roots%20in%20the%20Anglican%20Church.>

¹⁷ (2017) Episcopal Real Estate Transaction Guide
<https://www.diomass.org/sites/diomass/files/attachments/Real%20Estate%20Transaction%20Guide%202017%20Updated%2024-04-18.pdf>

¹⁸ Abdow, S. (2025, March 26). Interview by Nate Bastos. [Personal interview]. Consultant for Property Stewardship.

must still be approved by the Standing Committee and Bishop, but the congregation would then be the point of contact for potential buyers in those limited cases.

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Religion #7: United Methodist Church

Description of Religion: The United Methodist Church (UMC) shares the core belief in the Trinity, but they diverge by following the teachings of John Wesley. He emphasised the importance of grace, personal holiness and social justice. It currently encompasses over 12 million members who are geographically dispersed across Africa, Europe, the USA and Asia. All churches are tied together via the World Methodist Council, bringing alignment with the practice and principles.¹⁹

Overview of Decision-Making: We have been in contact with the Lead pastor from the Union Combined Parish of Boston, which has provided us with confirmed procedures regarding the sale of land. The structure of the UMC is a 5-stage hierarchical structure which focuses on making decisions collectively:

- Global Level
- Regional Level
- State/Province Level
- District Level
- Local Church Level

For the majority of the time, land sale is limited to local church and district level approval, however, the upper bodies can be called in for clarification regarding the requirements of the sale. The limitation of upper body involvement is due to the global level's role in the body of UMC, which is the "General Church Leadership". Its primary objective is to set the official church policies, doctrines and rules- taking place every 4 years. Once set and established, local churches need to comply with such policies implemented and cannot contradict practices, including selling procedures. Therefore, in rare instances, approvals are needed from upper bodies as rules and procedures have been outlined, and local churches need to ensure they comply with them.

Who to Contact/Next Steps: The best place to start is contacting local parishes/churches. Ideally, it should go through to the pastor, who will have all the information required regarding land availability for sale.

¹⁹*What we believe. (2025). First United Methodist Church.*
<https://www.delmarmethodist.org/core-beliefs>

Appendix

Item 1: Raw Notes from Interview with Kathryn Ostertag

Interviewee: Kathryn Ostertag

Role: SNEUCC, Director of Community Relations

Denomination: United Church of Christ

Date: 4/1/2025

- 1. What is the general decision-making structure/process for UCC churches for making land sale decisions? Are decisions made through a congregation-level vote, a board, etc.?**
 - a. UCC is not top down. All churches are independently owned. Subject to state/federal guidelines of having a board of directors. BUT: not obligated to include conferences in their decision-making process
 - b. Legacy church: endeavor to support them but ultimately their board of directors is responsible for land sales
 - i. Some church conferences might eliminate a property but other option is to reconfigure into smaller space...Wide range of options for maintaining
 - c. Living Legacy Workbook (\$9.99 for the copy): Shows the process for discernment, resources for decision-making in general
 - d. Molo village video: No one from the neighborhood was utilizing the church. Went to a "Partners in Vision program" → revitalized for more socially just housing, turning the whole city block around
 - i. Socially-just churches don't like to sell their things to entities that want to make a profit. SO: A UCC church that does decide to downsize its worship footprint will likely be interested in Habitat for Humanity partnership
- 2. Which group has the final authority to approve a land sale?**
 - a. Board of directors at individual church level
- 3. Who at the local level in Essex County would be the best point of contact regarding available parcels and sale intentions?**
 - a. pastor ALWAYS the point of contact
- 4. Are you aware of any UCC churches in Essex County currently looking to sell land?**
 - a. There is currently not a repository for making matches. Kathryn checked with her leadership team and found that there's really not a clear way to match land sale (desire to trade asset) with someone who wants to do it
 - b. Kate's logic about the business opportunity here: If they have an underperforming camp...And if there were another camp that had lost its space for any reason and is looking for a match, wouldn't it be great to be able to match them?
 - c. Not aware of any churches in Essex County. There are **not any leaders** above the local level who can provide this information.
- 5. Are these procedures/guidelines relatively similar between churches?**
 - a. LOTS of local variability on when the national entity
- 6. Do you have any advice/guidance for navigating land sale discussions with UCC leaders?**

- a. Send detailed inquiries to one of more UCC entities: asking if they have property that they might consider repurposing for a good cause
 - i. Specific project: Go right after very directly and make a very thoughtful inquiry. Or even ask for leads!
 - ii. A good church is very connected to the community of nonprofits, education, and local government.
 - iii. Possibility for network effects: We might enquire with 3-5 senior pastors who can say “talk to X high school” or “Y business” as they are downsizing and looking for a partner
- b. Key question: UCC or Catholic church considering this...Need to think about their timing, constituency, concerns of the neighborhood, trends, etc.
- c. Habitat for Humanity **confidential inquiry**

7. Trends

- a. “Polity”: decisions at independent level...Some churches heavily engage but others do their own things
- b. Can be challenging to see own statistics, but seeing that UCC is part of a general trend of moving toward lower numbers of people in pews (less building-centric worship)
 - i. Key question: Some churches are 350 years old. What does it take to keep one open?
- c. Demographic work relating to YIGBY: Predicting the number of churches that will close in MA. Shows by number of churches and by acreage.

8. Asks

- a. How did YIGBY research get these numbers?
- b. She’d love to see the finished paper when done

9. Other notes:

- a. Essex Agriculture: trade school that might have ears on the ground
- b. Kate’s perspective on the opportunity here: When you dig down into YIGBY, churches because of their special status (to current date) have a lot more levity. So if the legislature of their state helps, it can be even more freedom. So: Across all denominations, buildings are certainly going to decrease...Because of the status of churches, they have an easier path to convert buildings because it’s part of their faith to serve the underserved. SO: Putting the big shift in church membership WITH giant need for affordable housing + unique flexibility of faiths → will see a continued force in what’s going on in real estate

Item 2: Raw Notes from Interview with Jeffrey Sacks

Interviewee: Jeffrey Sacks

Role: Board Member, 2Life

Denomination: Judaism

Date: 03/24/25

- 1. From my understanding, each Synagogue makes its own decisions about land sale and acquisition. Could you please elaborate on this, and explain who exactly makes these decisions?**
 - a. Depends on each synagogues bylaws – need to research
 - b. Board of Directors
 - c. Some synagogues have social action committees
 - d. Some require membership approval
- 2. Does each region follow the same practice on decision making? For example, if there was a case study on the west coast, would it mimic the same practice on the east coast?**
 - a. Yes – land sale and acquisition decision making is always rabbi and board of directors
 - b. Making decision on asset does not differ across different denominations of judaism (ex: orthodox, fundamentalist)
- 3. Who at the local level would be the best point of contact regarding available parcels and sale intentions?**
 - a. Rabbi and board of directors make decisions
 - i. Sometimes vote of membership

Summary of Synagogue Land Sale Decisions

Synagogue leadership makes the decision locally. We will need to contact the rabbi, board, and committee members of each synagogue individually.

Item 3: Raw Notes from Interview with Joel Miller

Interviewee: Joel Miller

Role: Co-Minister, First Unitarian Universalist Society of Newton

Denomination: Unitarian Universalist

Date: 04/01/25

- 1. At what level does decision-making for the Unitarian Universalist church occur (e.g. local, county, regional, national)? Specifically, who is involved in decisions relating to land acquisition?**
 - a. The Unitarian Universalist church operates on a local basis, with each congregation making their own decisions on leadership, financing, and land sale and acquisition decisions. There is no headquarters that dictates how each congregation operates, but the Unitarian Universalist Association provides loose guidelines on various procedures a congregation may follow.
- 2. Who is the best point of contact for HHEC regarding land acquisition?**
 - a. The best point of contact for land sale inquiries is the minister of a congregation. However, if a congregation is declining in membership and close to dissolving, they may not have a minister. In this instance, the best point of contact is the chairman and/or board members.
- 3. When do UU congregations typically decide to sell land?**
 - a. Unitarian Universalist congregations primarily sell land when their congregation is dissolving. The sale of land in this case typically takes 6 months - 1 year. Reverend Joel could not think of many examples of a UU congregation selling land for a reason other than dissolution, but cited a few case studies in urban areas where UU congregations partnered with developers to create a mixed-use property that included commercial and residential spaces as well as a place for classrooms for their congregation.
- 4. Any other general thoughts regarding UU-HHEC partnership potential?**
 - a. Reverend Miller explained that many Unitarian Universalists don't have a business background, so crafting creative solutions and partnerships is a promising path to developing a UU owned property.

Item 4: Raw Notes from Interview with Bill Grogan + Archdiocese of Boston FAQ on Selling Church Properties

Interviewee: Bill Grogan

Role: President at Planning Office for Urban Affairs

Denomination: Catholicism

Date: 04/14/25

1. What does relegation to profane use mean?

- a. This term is used in Church law for when a Church building will no longer be used for Catholic liturgical worship. Once a property has been relegated, any remaining sacred items are removed and the building can be sold for use in an appropriate and dignified manner.

2. Before he can consider selling a church, does not the Cardinal have to relegate it to profane use?

- a. If a church building is to be sold to a group that will not use it for sacred worship, yes, the Cardinal follows the canons on “relegation of the Church to profane but not sordid use” (canon 1222 §2). This means a secular use, but one that is not unbecoming, immoral, or offensive to Catholics. If it is sold to a group that will use it for sacred worship, no, the Cardinal does not need to relegate it to profane use. The process used for considering the possible sale of a church follows both Church law and civil law, taking into account that the church must be relegated to profane use prior to a sale for purposes other than sacred worship.

3. What happens to these Church buildings once they have been relegated?

- a. The buildings will be appraised and likely marketed for sale. Prospective buyers will be invited to contact the Archdiocese. For each building there will be a specific way in which their memory and the important place they have in the lives, hearts and minds of our Catholic faithful will be memorialized and preserved for future generations. Whether through the relocation of stained glass windows, or religious statues or other sacred objects, the legacy of the closed Church will live on in other parishes of the Archdiocese.

4. Where does the money go from any sales of the closed Church properties?

- a. The funds derived from a sale of these Churches will be used for direct support of parishes of the Archdiocese. The Cardinal is in the process of establishing a dedicated fund for this specific use.

5. What happens to the sacred objects that remain?

- a. All sacred objects are catalogued and they will be made available first to welcoming parishes and then other Catholic Churches and Church buildings which make such requests.

6. Why did the Cardinal choose a consultation process prior to making his decisions?

- a. This extensive process is a substantial commitment of time and effort on the part of the Archdiocese. The Cardinal instituted it because he is firmly committed to ensuring that fair and just decisions would be reached regarding the future of sacred buildings. The process was an expression of his efforts to rebuild our Archdiocese, fostering a culture of trust, collaboration and cooperation.
- 7. How does the Cardinal's decision relate to the previous appeals of parishes which were closed?**
 - a. During the six or seven years since the closing of the parishes to which these Churches were connected, the Cardinal had kept his word that he would wait for the resolution of the appeals that were filed with the Holy See, and his personal representatives were in dialogue with the faithful who had appealed. When the appeals were concluded last year, the Cardinal consulted broadly and extensively with the faithful regarding the possible relegation of the Church buildings. He now asks the faithful to accept his decision and he has again reached out in dialogue to those who earlier opposed the closing of the parishes.
- 8. When did the Archdiocese begin the process of planning the consultation?**
 - a. The Archdiocese began this planning for the consultation as soon as the appeals process was concluded in the Fall of 2010. The gathering of information for the consultation phase began long before February 18th. This is not an entirely new consultative process. Some aspects of the current process are new, such as the use of Internet technology for collecting data (i.e. surveys). But the process itself is very much in continuity with past practices and in conformity with the law of the Church. As in the past, for example, this process included pastors consulting with their parishes and the Presbyteral Council hearing the results of these consultations through presentations by pastors and regional bishops/vicars. In every case of relegation of a Church, the Archbishop has heard the Presbyteral Council before making a decision.
- 9. Will there be a consultation process for more churches soon? Why were some other churches not included in the first round of consultation?**
 - a. The reason the Archdiocese considered so many Churches for sale at the present time is primarily due to the fact that a number of appeals on the parishes were returned at the same time last Fall. At the present time, Cardinal Seán has received several other requests from pastors to consider the sale of other Church buildings. Prior to making his decision about further relegations, the Cardinal will ask that information be gathered on each Church building, followed by a consultation process that includes pastors, the faithful, and the relevant parish and archdiocesan councils. It is important that each process be thorough and deliberate in the gathering of information and consultation.
- 10. How does the process for the sale of a Church conclude?**

- a. The final formal steps in the sale of a Church building depend on local circumstances. The building is listed for sale and negotiations are undertaken with potential buyers. Prior to a sale, and depending on the value of the property, the Archdiocesan Finance Council would also be involved. As stated above, no church which is relegated for profane use will be sold for any purpose which is unbecoming, immoral or offensive to Catholics.

11. Does the pastoral priest have any real power?

- a. All Parish properties are owned by the Roman Catholic Archbishops of Diocese, owner of all parish property. Parish in community X decides they have access to land they want to sell... goes to Parish and finance council at local parish, might be selling land for maximum value to pay off loans or for purchase, decision is tied to financial or mission based objective... common times there is a goal. A lot of times sale could be long term ground lease, typical path/method has shifted, more into long term leases - last decade.... Could be annual or multiple leases.

12. Can you walk me through the process at the Diocesan Level?

- a. After the pastoral decision, the pastor approaches the property management real estate office of the archdiocese, our parish voted to convey the ground lease of property/sale. Engage broker, have appraisal, market property. Goal of trying to find balance of mission and money from pastor
- b. Developing affordable housing will not generate as much money, not as attractive. Real estate office, hiring broker, conduct appraisal, marketed, offers discussed
- c. Offers discussed between real estate office and parish, make recommendation to finance committee of Boston/ finance council.
- d. From financial council - real estate professionals, they make recommendation to college of consultors next, college of consultors are advisor to archbishop of Boston. College of consultors are religious leaders
- e. After College of consultors, typically archbishop signs off on sale. Archbishop signs off on sale, all relies and falls back on local pastor.
- f. Local Habitat needs to identify parish property, vacant land or building, then contact pastor, see what the Church's plans are, would most likely be ground lease, see if the past supports missions
- g. Need local support before going to archdiocese.

13. Are you aware of any purchases/sales by the Catholic Church done for non - new churches?

- a. Archdiocese currently in process with Parish in Whalen, went through local parish, wanted to use excess land to develop affordable housing, submitted proposal
- b. Multiple properties currently under negotiation
 - i. 75-99 long term ground lease
- c. Time Estimate: Time varies. Whalen property, between 12 and 24 months.

- i. Less than 50 if church would sell at all. Would need to explain why Church needs to be sale instead of long term land lease..... Long term ground lease is very popular right now.... Hard to convince otherwise, possible, but a tad unlikely. (Big hurdle)

FINAL 04/30/25

Item 5: Raw Notes from Interview with Chris Wendell

Interviewee: Chris Wendell

Role: Chief of Staff

Denomination: Episcopal

Date: 03/25/2025

- 1. Would an inquiry about land availability need to go through both the Standing Committee and the Bishop, or does it vary from situation to situation?**
 - a. Yes, our internal rules require that all alienation of property be approved by both the Standing Committee and the Bishop.
- 2. Who at the local level would be the best point of contact regarding available parcels of land and sale intentions?**
 - a. In most cases, land sales by our Diocese occur after congregations close; and so inquiries about purchasing particular parcels should be directed to the Diocesan offices. Very rarely, an active congregation will look to sell land. Such sales must still be approved by the Standing Committee and Bishop, but they are usually organized by the congregation and they would be the point of contact for potential buyers in those limited cases.
- 3. Could you elaborate on Canon 18 details of the criteria for sale and approval of land?**
 - a. We don't sell land very often, so the criteria determining whether to approve a sale are usually developed on a case-by-case basis. In most cases, obtaining a market-rate financial return on the sale is a key component of the decision-making process, though we have in some circumstances used other criteria that are more "mission-aligned" — particularly when there is the opportunity to sell a worship space to another Christian community seeking to use it for worship purposes.
- 4. Do procedures and guidelines differ from Region to Region?**
 - a. No.
- 5. Which group has the overarching final authority to approve a land sale?**
 - a. Final approval on sales belongs to the Standing Committee and the Bishop.

Item 6: Raw Notes from Interview with Steve Abdow

Interviewee: Steve Abdow

Role: Consultant for Property Stewardship

Denomination: Episcopal

Date: 03/26/2025

- Reiteration on the fact that both the Standing Committee and Bishop need to approve land sales

- Not much land to sell
- We discussed canon 18 which details that there are some work arounds to this approval law, however, he made it clear that these kinds of circumstances are extremely, extremely rare
- Episcopal doesn't usually have much acreage
- Discussed the Real Estate Advisory Committee → only help with expertise, don't have the final decision → put into place because a congregation sold a parcel of land in Cambridge for half a million when it could have been worth 5
- All Episcopal owned by Diocese is a trust for the Diocese → rather illiquid
- Mr. Abdow helps out if someone is looking to purchase land → have to fill out a questionnaire and typically want it 45-60 days prior. Mr. Abdow helps narrow down the focus of the proposal so that when going to final approval by S.C. and Bishop it is as clear as possible with no loose ends
- Some push back because people don't want to see their churches close

Item 7: Raw Notes from Interview with Jay Williams

Interviewees: Jay Williams

Role: Pastor, Union Church Boston

Denomination: Methodist

Date: 03/28/2025

1. Does it always go to the regional and annual conference level?

- a. The System is interlocked- it is a connecional polity - thus a local church holds property in trust for the united methodist church. As such, it cannot dispose of property without expressing authorisation for it. The local church needs to obtain the *District and Regional governance* bodies' approval to be able to sell a piece of land.

2. A little more on the trust clause[between local churches and District governance].

- a. The local congregation do not own the property, and it is held in trust. But it is responsible the for day-day of its maintenance/upkeep. If a sale or mortgage is needed, then the next body that needs to approve it is the district committee and district superintendent [acts on behalf of bishop].
- b. Example: Congress met in 2019 about queer people belonging in UMC. They released the trust clause, opening it for 3 years, allowing local congregations to leave with their property. Most churches that left were not affirming to queer people and only in this period, they were able to leave and take their property with them[able to decide without an approval of a hierachal body in this instance].

- c. Once a sale is approved internally, no longer applicable to trust clause. Thus Habitat for Humanity is free to sell properties to the homeowners.
- 3. At the local level, who is the best person to reach out to regarding available parcels/acres that would be willing to?**
- a. It is twofold. It is first the pastor, and he would engage with the board of trustees that would be responsible for the negotiation preliminary proposal and would go through a series of internal approvals. These internal approvals are listed below:
 - i. Financial
 - ii. Personal
 - iii. Board of trustees[facilitator - co-support with finance team]
 - b. Board of trustees and finance report to the Church council. Once approved, the consultation with the district committee and the district superintendent proceeds. To be approved, it requires a simple majority vote. It would go to the annual meeting only if it cannot be resolved through the district level.
 - c. Note that the annual conference level meets every 4 years, so this should be taken into consideration if, through the sale it needs to be handled by the highest level of committee. Though, the assumption is it wouldn't go to the annual conference as 4 bodies have vetted it.
 - d. Note that the annual conference does not vote on it but its rule is that of a supreme court where it implements policies/changes them, which can limit local transactions. For example, it is illegal for a local church to sell its property to private developers that would sell luxury condos/homes. This is because it is part of an abstract policy which is concerned with a consistent approach to dealing with parcels once sold.
- 4. Is decision-making/procedure centralized across regions?**
- a. The same general procedure applies. This is because they are tied with the annual conference, which sets the general policies that apply everywhere. Annual conference can add on rules and restrictions [i.e. for the Region of Massachusetts and New Hampshire], but it cannot contradict the consensus of the General conference.
- 5. How long does it take on average for the selling procedure?**
- a. Variation in the procedure thus cannot provide an estimate.
- 6. Will you ever donate land?**
- a. UMC does(land rested institution). Especially for restoring land to native people at no cost but it still has to go through the process. For example, the annual conference has voted to give back to the local black farmers group[organization] in Vermont. But the congregation has permission to have worship in the building.
- 7. Could you identify 3-5 churches that are thinking of selling land?**

- a. This is all local. The only way to find whether or not things are under consideration would be to touch base with a superintendent/annual conference with a director of ministry if there are internal talks.
- b. Ray pointed my attention to the Wesley development group. They serve as New England's UMC internal consulting of real estate bodies. This body would have more regional insight.

Item 8: Email Transcript with Baptist Reverend James Sinclair

Interviewees: James Sinclair

Role: Pastor, First United Baptist Church

Denomination: American Baptist Church

Date: 03/27/2025

Questions:

- What is the typical process followed by a congregation when considering a land sale?
- I understand that a congregational vote is typically required to make a decision as important as that of land sale. How commonly do congregational meetings typically occur?
- Are there typically specific committees, trustees, or boards that play a key role in preparing recommendations before the matter is brought to a vote? Do these groups typically exist for smaller congregations?
- Does the congregation seek guidance or approval from any regional body, such as TABCOM or their local association, before proceeding with a property sale?
- Would you suggest an interested party make first contact with the pastor or reverend, or is there another recommended point of contact?
- In your experience, how long does the typical approval process take from the initial discussion to finalizing the sale?

Email Response:

Good morning, Luke,

You are correct. Generally speaking, congregational polity gives all decision-making authority to the voting members of the congregation, and sometimes, though rarely, to the entire active worshipping body. As to who qualifies as a voting member, well, that is up to the voting members. 😊

With that in mind, a congregation can vote to allocate certain power and authority to individuals, committees, councils, boards, and other bodies within the church that might be created to accomplish specific tasks. Sometimes a church council is given permission to make purchasing and selling decisions up to a limited amount. I have never encountered a situation in which the decision to sell land is made without, at the very least, keeping the congregation in the loop. At

any time the voting members of the congregation can vote to rescind authority and reclaim that power for itself.

Given that local churches make their own decisions regarding all aspects of church life, from requirements for membership, to calling and firing pastoral staff and other personnel, to worship and investments, etc., there is no one governing template for all.

In my prior work as an area minister for the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, I can tell you that when it comes to buying and selling land, possessions, and structures, the congregation is kept in the loop even when it has allocated the power to do so to a group within the church such as the trustees, for instance. Smaller congregations might create something like a committee of the whole for these purposes so that everyone is involved in all the decision-making.

Rarely is denominational approval needed, though some churches will ask for help with the process. Sometimes a church will have signed a prior agreement with the region (TABCOM, for instance) that placed some requirements on the congregation before it can sell its property. The entire process can take as much as a year or more, depending on particulars such as researching deeds, bylaws, state laws, boundaries, and deed restrictions or limits placed on the land's use by whomever might have donated it, or by the congregation when it was first purchased.

I would suggest that a party interested in buying a church's land make first contact by sending the same letter to the pastor, the moderator, and the chair of the board of trustees, each in its own envelope.

Generally, congregations have one or two annual meetings. Reports and the budget can be discussed and voted on at one meeting/year. Or one meeting can be held for receiving, accepting, and voting on the reports and election of officers, and another to review and approve the budget for the coming year. Of course, from time to time a church may hold other meetings in addition to their usual ones. For instance, to vote on a candidate for pastor or to remove the pastor, to purchase land, or to make major changes to the buildings and bylaws/constitution.

In short, voting members of a local church hold all the decision-making power within their congregation. Voting members may allocate some decision-making power to an existing group, to an ad hoc committee, to an individual, or to an outside source, and can take back that power as they see fit.

I hope this helps.

Yours,

Jim