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Partners for Sacred Places

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ECONOMIC IMPACT OF AVERAGE OLDER CHURCH OR SYNAGOGUE MEASURED AT \$1.7 MILLION ANNUALLY

New "Economic Halo" research findings reveal civic value of America's sacred places

PHILADELPHIA – America's older churches and synagogues bring major economic value to their communities, making a significant contribution to local employment, education, children and families, the performing arts, and overall neighborhood health.

A new scholarly study of the "halo effect" of older sacred places – conducted by Partners for Sacred Places in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) – shows that the average urban church or synagogue contributes \$1.7 million in value to its community each year. For a city like Philadelphia, with nearly 800 purpose-built sacred places, the total economic Halo value generated by churches and synagogues is over \$1.3 billion each year.

The study was conducted under the direction of Dr. Ram Cnaan, Professor and Director of the Program for Religion and Social Policy Research at the University of Pennsylvania, and was based on an in-depth examination of 90 sacred places, randomly selected, in Philadelphia, Chicago and Fort Worth.

Notes Dr. Cnaan, "too often, congregations take an apologetic stance for not contributing to their communities and for being tax-exempt entities. In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, "If you don't count it, it doesn't count." In this study we counted the congregational value to its local ecology. Congregational valuation can be an important tool in signaling to the outer world how valuable congregations are to their immediate communities and how costly would losing congregations be to the given society."

Other highlights from the study:

- Of the total Halo value of a sacred place, 40% comes from educational programs (including schools and day care programs), 32% from direct spending (congregational budgets and program budgets), and 28% from "catalytic" effects, such as the spending of visitors who come to the church or synagogue for events and programs.
- 87% of those who benefit from social service, educational or cultural programs housed in the average sacred place are not members of the host congregation, indicating that churches and synagogues are *de facto* community centers
- Each sacred place is a magnet for visitors, attracting 780 visits each week to its neighborhood, on average. The 90 sacred places in the study generated over 3.6 million visits each year, almost 50% of whom came for community programs. Only 11% of those visits were for worship; 31% came for education programs and 9% for special events.

"This study is providing powerful new evidence for our argument that older churches and synagogues are public assets that make enormous contributions to our communities. Everybody has a stake in their stewardship and good use," said Robert Jaeger, President of Partners for Sacred Places.

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This new understanding of the larger civic value of sacred places suggests that the secular world has a significant stake in the health and vitality of sacred places, since their impact and value is not religious in nature. For leaders in government, philanthropy, community development, the arts and social services interested in the health and vitality of neighborhoods, especially those outside the core downtown of a city, investing in sacred places pays dividends, such as:

- **Supporting local businesses and employment.** One of most significant impact a sacred place makes is through its spending, hiring on average 5 full-time and 6 part-time employees. Visitors to the average congregation generate over \$375,000 in spending on local restaurants and stores, transportation services, and for overnight visitors, lodging.
- **Incubating and housing nonprofit organizations.** Many sacred places have a wide range of spaces available – ranging from auditoriums, kitchens and dining rooms to classrooms and gymnasiums – and therefore can often accommodate nonprofits that are growing or being due to changes in their needs and circumstances.
- **Building social capital.** The local church or synagogue is trusted by parents, families and other key populations, and thus can provide a natural setting for programs and events that help local residents form new bonds and take action in response to local problems and opportunities.

Jaeger adds that “at a time when government and philanthropy are looking for ways to support community facilities affordably and sustainably, sacred places can be a smart way to invest. Sacred places are usually located at key intersections and are adjacent to key populations that are targeted for philanthropic initiatives and government programs.”

Partners for Sacred Places is America’s only national, nonsectarian, nonprofit organization dedicated to the sound stewardship and active community use of older religious properties.