



## Vacant churches are community assets

By Dave Hurst

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Immaculate Conception's interior features Gothic arches that soar into a faceted ceiling that projects music perfectly. Refurbished in 1983 after a destructive fire, the sanctuary retains a colorful beauty and an excellent Stein pipe organ in playing condition.

Saints Casimir and Emerich's attractiveness is more subtle and masked by a century of steel-mill soot. But its tan brickwork is as distinctive as its full basement and commercial kitchen are practical.

Saint Columba's massive, colorful mural – located behind the altar – is more than enough justification to preserve this church. At the foot of the crucified Christ are Adam and Eve, then on descending steps are flanking figures ranging from a Roman soldier to the Kaiser's soldiers of World War I on one side and a top-hatted industrialist in front of a steel mill on the other – a revealing glimpse of perspectives circa 1919.

Each of these churches was built through the sweat and sacrifice of immigrants during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a monument to Americanization. Each is a contributing structure within the Cambria City National Register Historic District in Johnstown. Each faces a very real possibility of demolition.

But each of these former houses of worship, which were closed in 2009 in a consolidation of Catholic parishes, has hope of new life through reuse that also could invigorate the Cambria City neighborhood and Johnstown, itself. It is the same opportunity offered by all vacated church buildings, wherever they may be located. For more effectively than any other type of building, a vintage church captures important elements of a community's past; often highly stylized architecturally, it also contributes to that community's unique identity.

While special, however, these surplus buildings also present very real challenges. Constructed during a day when people would have thought carbon footprints meant tracked coal dust, these structures tend to be energy inefficient and expensive to maintain. The parish responsible for the three Cambria City churches, for example, spent \$22,000 last year just to minimally heat them. Because they house large and open spaces, most former churches don't work very well for typical retail or office uses. And because they formerly were places dedicated to God, many people expect their reuse to be at least respectful.

So finding new life for old churches is a tall order that leads to the eventual destruction of too many. Which is why Partners for Sacred Places ([www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org)) was formed back in 1989 as a nonprofit, nonsectarian organization dedicated to keeping older religious properties in use as community assets. One of the ways Partners does this is through a community brainstorming process called a "design charrette."

During a three-day period last month, a team of architects and design professionals came to Johnstown, listened to ideas brought forward by members of the community,

then produced some basic architectural drawings to show how the concepts could work in the three Cambria City churches. Significantly, the architects strived to identify reuses that would add to what the Cambria City neighborhood is becoming – a cultural district. Appropriately, their designs did little – if any – damage to the architectural integrity of the buildings. Yet within those constraints, the charrette resulted in ideas such as a musical performance venue inside Immaculate Conception, an ethnic food factory and cooking school within Saints Casimir and Emerich, and a performing arts center or plant conservatory in Saint Columba. Now interested parties are refining their ideas for these historical churches, beginning business planning and researching potential funding sources.

Hope, which brought immigrants to this country, remains. If we tackle the challenges of reusing our vintage, vacant church buildings with the same faith and hard work our ancestors demonstrated while building them, these unique community assets can continue to contribute to our quality of life for the foreseeable future.