

# FORM AND FUNCTION OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS: STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

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The Eastern Townships has an undeniably unique landscape. This uniqueness can be attributed to the many cultural groups that began settlement of the region as early as 1790. The first settlers came from the New England states and were followed by immigrants of British origin (i.e., English, Scottish, Irish) in the 1820s and migrating French Canadians in the 1850s. The presence of each one of these cultural groups in the region is reflected in the landscape. Churches have become important distinctive elements of the region's landscape characterising the presence of these different cultural groups at different times and in different locations. Over the last few decades many of these churches have experienced decreasing membership while increasing costs have compelled their congregations and communities to develop strategies for survival. (The word survival in the context of this study is not used in reference to the survival of a particular religious denomination, but rather the survival of a church structure as an element of a community.)



Figure 1\*

*Isolated: Church of the Epiphany (1889),  
Ways Mills.*

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*\*(All pictures taken by Meredith G. Watkins and Cedric Bourgeois.)*

Articles in local newspapers surface every so often detailing the plight of particular churches in the region. Protestant churches face closure due to the ever-decreasing English-speaking population and to a lack of capital. Congregations are faced with the ever-growing challenge of raising enough funds to cover basic costs. Many of the structures in question were built over 100 years ago and congregations



*Figure 2*  
*Rural: Sawyerville Baptist Church (1889),*  
*Sawyerville.*

are faced with onerous maintenance costs. (Other costs might include heating, electricity, telephone, insurance, cleaning, administration and minister's salary.) The age profile of all congregations in the Eastern Townships is becoming elderly; one can safely estimate the majority to be over the age of 50. Thus, the individuals who now sit on boards, raise funds and participate in Sunday services will not be able to continue to be the main source of support of their churches in the near future. What then does the future hold for rural and urban Protestant churches in the Eastern Townships? What are the denominational solutions to decreasing numbers and increasing costs? What are the objectives of strategies undertaken to prevent church closure?

The aim of this study was twofold. We proposed to analyse the strategies employed by congregations, church officials and communities in order to maintain churches (by maintain we mean state of repair and continued religious function); and, to investigate the sale and subsequent change of function of church structures when sold to private interests. Since the Eastern Townships region boasts over 100 Protestant churches, it was necessary to sample a few representative case studies from this total population of churches. The first step was to establish a method of sample selection. The following constitutes the criteria used to select the initial case studies:

Location	Three types of location were identified: isolated, village/town, urban. We attempted to select a representative number of case studies for each category to allow for comparison. We worked with the assumption that isolated and rural churches had greater significance in the lives of local residents than urban ones, primarily due to family heritage (Figure 1, 2, 3).
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- Denomination** The Eastern Townships, having been settled by numerous cultural groups, is represented by many different denominations. A sample list includes Adventist, Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Unitarian, and United.
- Function** This category classifies the function of the church structure, whether it continues to hold services or has been sold and has experienced a change of function such as becoming a restaurant, library, cultural centre, art gallery, music hall, garage, or dilapidated ruin (Figure 4).
- Participation** The willingness of church members (ministers and parishioners) to participate in the study. We did encounter a few church officials that were either unable to devote their time to the project or did not wish to discuss the current status of their churches with us – in which case we were required to select another case study.

There were two historical events that surfaced in the majority of interviews with clergy and laypersons with respect to the current challenge of maintaining congregation sizes. The first circumstance was the regionalisation of the English school boards in the late 1960s. Many communities experienced the closure of local schools resulting in the necessity of bussing local children lengthy distances in order to attend larger, regional schools. The systematic removal of younger generations from the local area tended to create a fragmented community. Friends, sports and other activities for the youth were likely to be held outside the community in the proximity of the regional school. This has been interpreted by some as a cause of the dissolution of communities.

The second was the election of the Parti Quebecois to power in the province in 1976. The ensuing political climate in the Eastern



Figure 3  
Urban: St. Paul's United Church of Canada  
(1887), Magog.



*Figure 4*

*Tomifobia United Church (1892), Tomifobia.  
Sold privately in 1985.*

Townships was such that communities experienced a mass exodus of English-speaking Townshippers to other provinces. It should be emphasised here that dwindling congregation sizes aren't necessarily a result of individuals (i.e., English-speakers) in the community not attending church, but rather it is more commonly a result of the fact that there aren't enough individuals remaining to make up a sufficient congregation, especially when villages and towns have more than one denomination to support (thereby splitting the existing English population). Such a case is evident in Sawyerville, Quebec where the

Baptist Church reports to have lost about 25 families in 1976 alone, further evidence of the dissolution of English-speaking communities.

The diminishing number of parishioners has a significant impact on the amount of funds that are raised to support the church. There are many church organisations such as the Anglican Church Women that are active fundraisers in their communities but, as has been previously mentioned, these individuals are ageing and are not being replaced. In the majority of the case studies, churches have had to decrease a minister's salary in order to balance the budget. Such is the case at Grace Anglican Church in Sutton, Quebec. Reverend Tim Smart works part time at the church and part time with the Diocese of Montreal. This reduction allows for the reallocation of funds to other expenses incurred by the church. Further evidence of cut-backs is also seen in the Anglican Diocese of Quebec with the fusion of parishes such as the 8-point parish of Coaticook overseen by the Reverend Canon Curtis Patterson. This parish includes St. George's, Ayer's Cliff; St. Stephen's, Coaticook; St. James the Less, Compton; St. Cuthbert's, Dixville; St. Matthias, Fitch Bay; St. James', Hatley; Christ Church, Stanstead; and, Church of the Ephiphany, Way's Mills. Sunday services are rotated among the various locations. The United Church also has multi-point pastoral charges, like that of the Reverend Lynda Harrison. Since 2000, she has been in charge of the United Churches in Hatley, Waterville and North Hatley. These

churches continue to hold services at each location every Sunday; Reverend Harrison feels that it would make more sense to have only one service on Sundays on a rotational basis at each location. This would be an example of one of the first steps taken in the avoidance of closure.

Stronger roots in isolated rural areas seem to aid in the preservation of church structures and function. The Universalist Church in Huntingville serves as an example. The church has but four services a year (July, August, October, and December) and a different, visiting minister delivers each service. Heritage Huntingville, a board of trustees officially incorporated in 1996 as Patrimoine Huntingville/Heritage Huntingville acquired the church property and land. The church, through this organisation, received governmental funding after a labourious application procedure. It enabled the committee to undertake the essential repairs to the church structure. Money has been invested and the church relies heavily on donations made by the congregation. The Huntingville Universalist Church continues to operate as a church because of the time and effort of the many committee members dedicated to preserving the function and structure of the church (Figure 5).

It is difficult to assess exactly who is involved in the decision process behind church closure and eventual sale. It varies with each denomination, but for the most part it is essentially the decision of the remaining parishioners. Attempts are made during the sale to maintain the exterior of the structure as is and to have a respectable function for the building in the future. Such was the intention for the United Church in Tomifibia when it was sold privately in 1985. However, the current state of the church is one of dilapidation. The interior has been stripped, the roof is caving-in and the windows have been broken and smashed. It would be surprising to see the church remain standing by next spring (Figure 4). In contrast, the former Anglican Church of the Good Shepherd (built 1877) in Glen Sutton was



*Figure 5*

*Huntingville Universalist Church (1844),  
Huntingville.*



*Figure 6*

*Church of the Good Shepherd (1877), Glen Sutton.*

*Picture taken during an intermission of a public concert held in August of 2002.*

also sold to private interests. Miklos Takas, (Directeur General & Artistique, Societe Philharmonique de Montreal) who purchased the church in 1999, has maintained the integrity of the building. Its current function is that of a music studio, which Mr. Takas opens to the public for free concerts (Figure 6).

When discussing the value of the church in the landscape, ministers continually expressed no attachment to the church structure. They attributed their lack of attachment to the fact that it is more important to have faithful parishioners and to hold services worshipping God than it is to have a building. Such sentiments are seen in the following statements made by Reverend Walter Gawa (Sawyerville Baptist Church) and Reverend Tim Smart (Grace Anglican Church, Sutton) respectively: “The building is not important; it’s only a shelter from the weather”; “... the church is not the building, it’s the people”. Their lack of attachment to these structures also has to do with the fact that most are not from the area and therefore do not have any particular emotional loyalty to the structure. They do sympathise, however, with those members of the congregation who feel great attachment to the churches. Many of these members are long time residents of the villages/towns and in some cases are

descendants of the individuals who took part in building the church. To them the church is of great significance to the community and to their heritage. Many were baptised or married in the churches and the structures have been an important part of their communities. They constitute essential community elements within the landscape.

The future of these churches depends upon younger generations. In the case studies selected for this study an overwhelming majority of them are having great difficulty attracting younger parishioners. Only two of the twelve churches actually have enough children to hold Sunday school classes. If this trend continues what will happen to the churches? Who will take over their administration? The fate of the Protestant churches in the Eastern Townships depends upon outside funding. The *ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec* has recently funnelled large sums of money into the preservation of selected churches throughout the Townships. These churches were evaluated and assigned a patrimonial value, which can be loosely broken down to the age of structure, state of structure, and aesthetic value of structure. The allocated monies are used for renovation and maintenance. But once renovated, whom do they serve? What use does a church perform without a congregation? Do they simply become museums dotted throughout the countryside there to remind us of other times when church attendance assumed an importance place in the lives of its inhabitants?

