

# **Repurposing Vacant Houses of Worship: Ideas & Opportunities for Economic Development Districts**

**EDD Community of Practice Webinar  
July 29, 2025**





**EDD CoP**

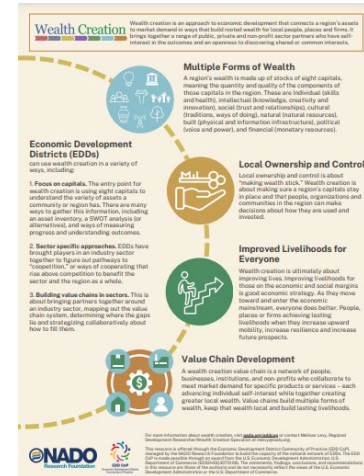
Economic Development District  
Community of Practice



**More info at: [www.nado.org/EDDCoP](http://www.nado.org/EDDCoP)**

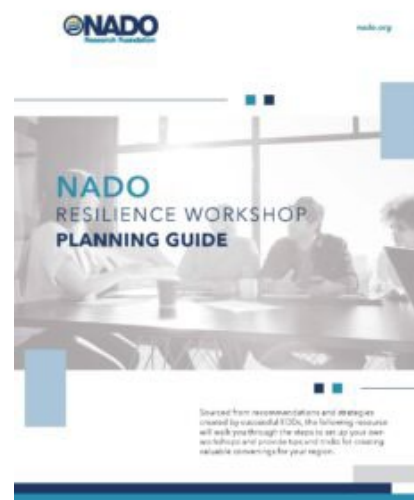
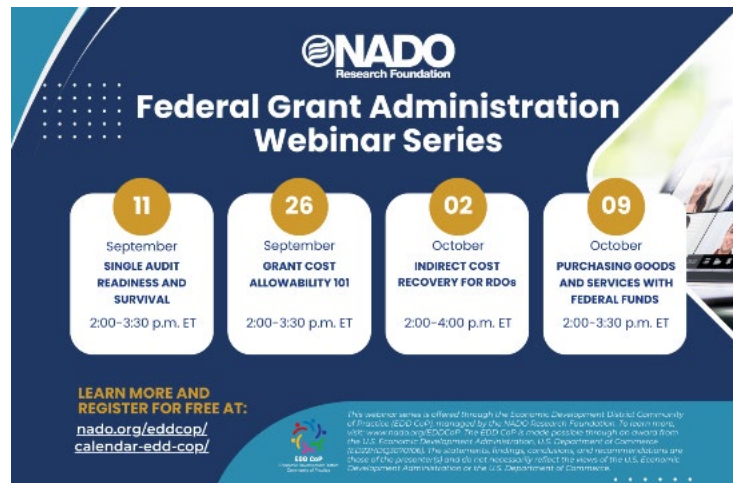
This webinar is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: [www.nado.org/EDDCoP](http://www.nado.org/EDDCoP). The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this webinar are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

CEDS 101: What You Need to Know Right Now About the CEDS (March 2021)

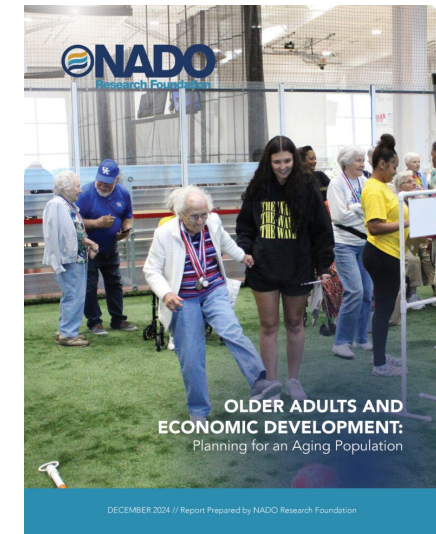


## MAKING IT COUNT: ACHIEVING, MEASURING, AND REPORTING RESULTS WITH DATA

TIP SHEET

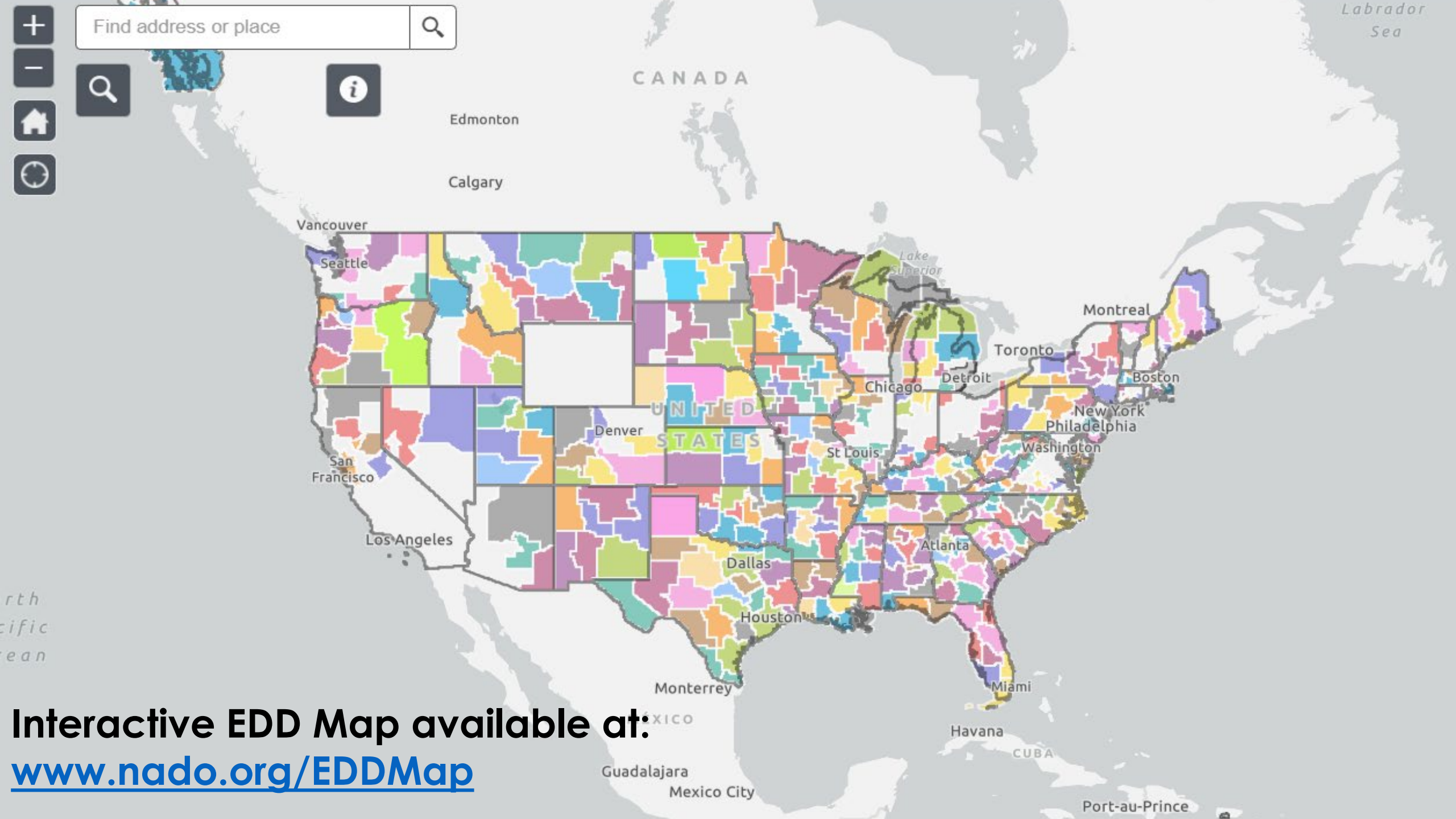
HAZARD MITIGATION &  
CEDS INTEGRATION

### TIP SHEET



**Visit: [www.nado.org/EDDCoP](http://www.nado.org/EDDCoP)**





Interactive EDD Map available at:  
[www.nado.org/EDDMap](http://www.nado.org/EDDMap)

## Peer Learning

The NADO Research Foundation manages four virtual Peer Learning Communities as part of the Economic Development District Community of Practice. These cohorts are designed to build and strengthen bonds among EDD staff across the national network Economic Development Districts. Each group has a different audience and objective – read on to learn more about the specifics of each and how you can get involved.



### EDD CoP Collaborative Learning Group

The Collaborative Learning Group (CLG) is a 6-month virtual training and networking opportunity for new Economic Development District (EDD) staff who have been at their organization for 2 years or less.

[Learn More](#)



### CEDS Peer Exchange Groups

These informal groups are designed to help staff troubleshoot challenges with their CEDS, share methods and 'best practices', and support each other during yearly and 5-year CEDS updates.

[Learn More](#)



### NADO Mentor Program for Executive Directors

The NADO Mentor Program pairs experienced executive directors with new executive directors for one year to help new executive directors address the challenges facing their organizations and regions by connecting with experienced RDO leaders.

[Learn More](#)



### New Executive Directors Resources

The New Executive Directors group was formed to share experiences, learn firsthand from experienced Directors, and have support when beginning this often-challenging role.

[Learn More](#)



### Virtual EDD Chapter Meet Ups

Virtual EDD Chapter Meet Ups provide a space for Economic Development District staff to connect and network quarterly in small group discussions with peers in their EDA regions/NADO chapters.

[Learn More](#)

Learn more about our **virtual peer learning groups** at: <https://www.nado.org/copgroups/>

## Wealth Creation



## EDD LEARNING COHORT

New **wealth creation** group forming!  
Apply by **August 15**. Learn more at:  
<https://www.nado.org/wealth-creation-cohort/>



Join us in Salt Lake City, UT on October 14-17, 2025!

More info at: <https://www.nado.org/2025atc/>





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# Brett Schwartz

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Change is inevitable,  
but transformation  
is a choice.



# Today's Presenter



**Rick Reinhard**

Principal Consultant at Niagara  
Consulting Group

## Summary

# Spiritual brownfields



- Denomination to denomination
- Coast to coast
- We're at the beginning
- Smietana, RNS: Great Mismatch is "biggest issue"



# Summary

## Perfect storm



Spiritual Brownfields

Decline in religious membership—70 to 47% in one generation



Increase in property costs—now \$7-10/sf

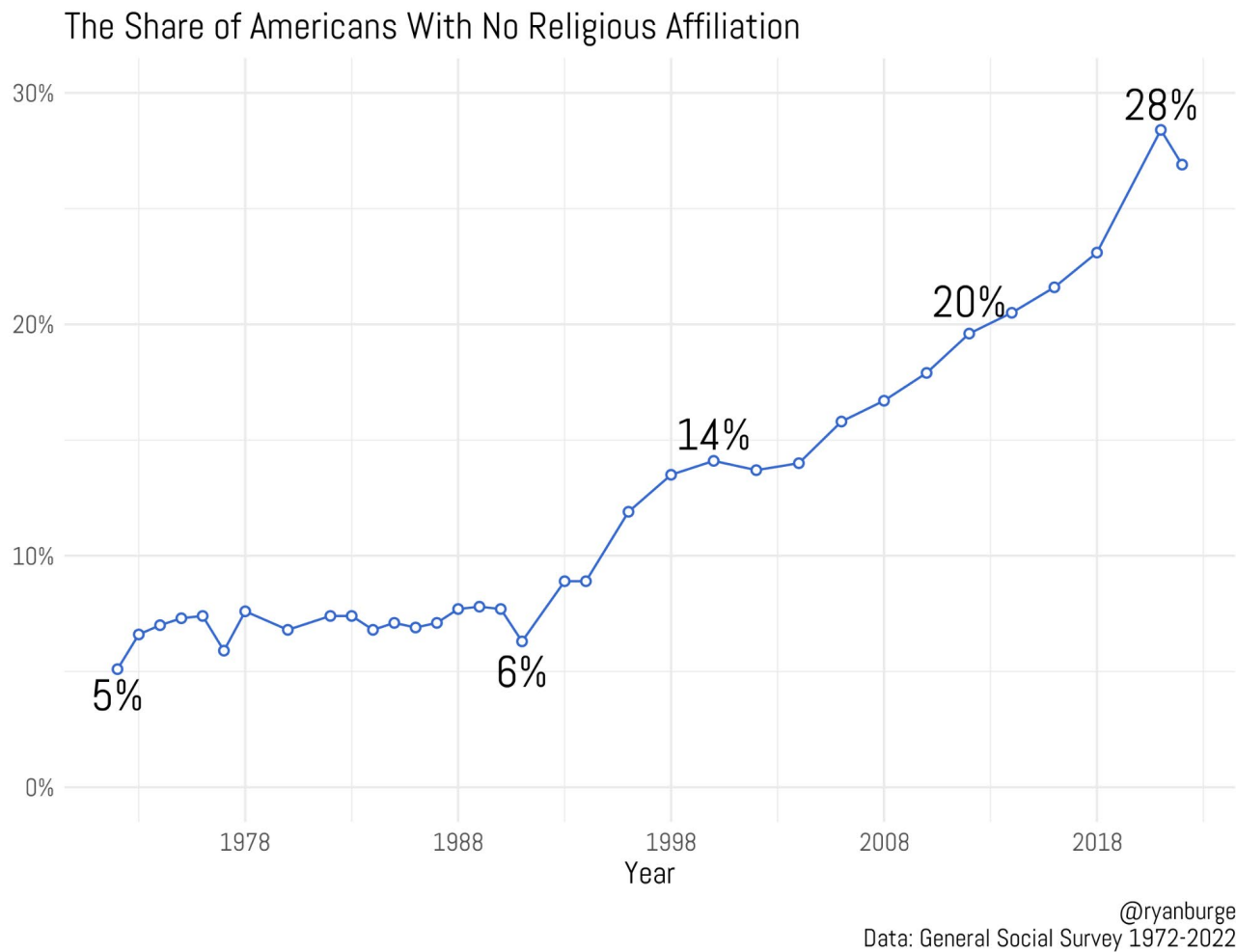


Covid-19 pandemic

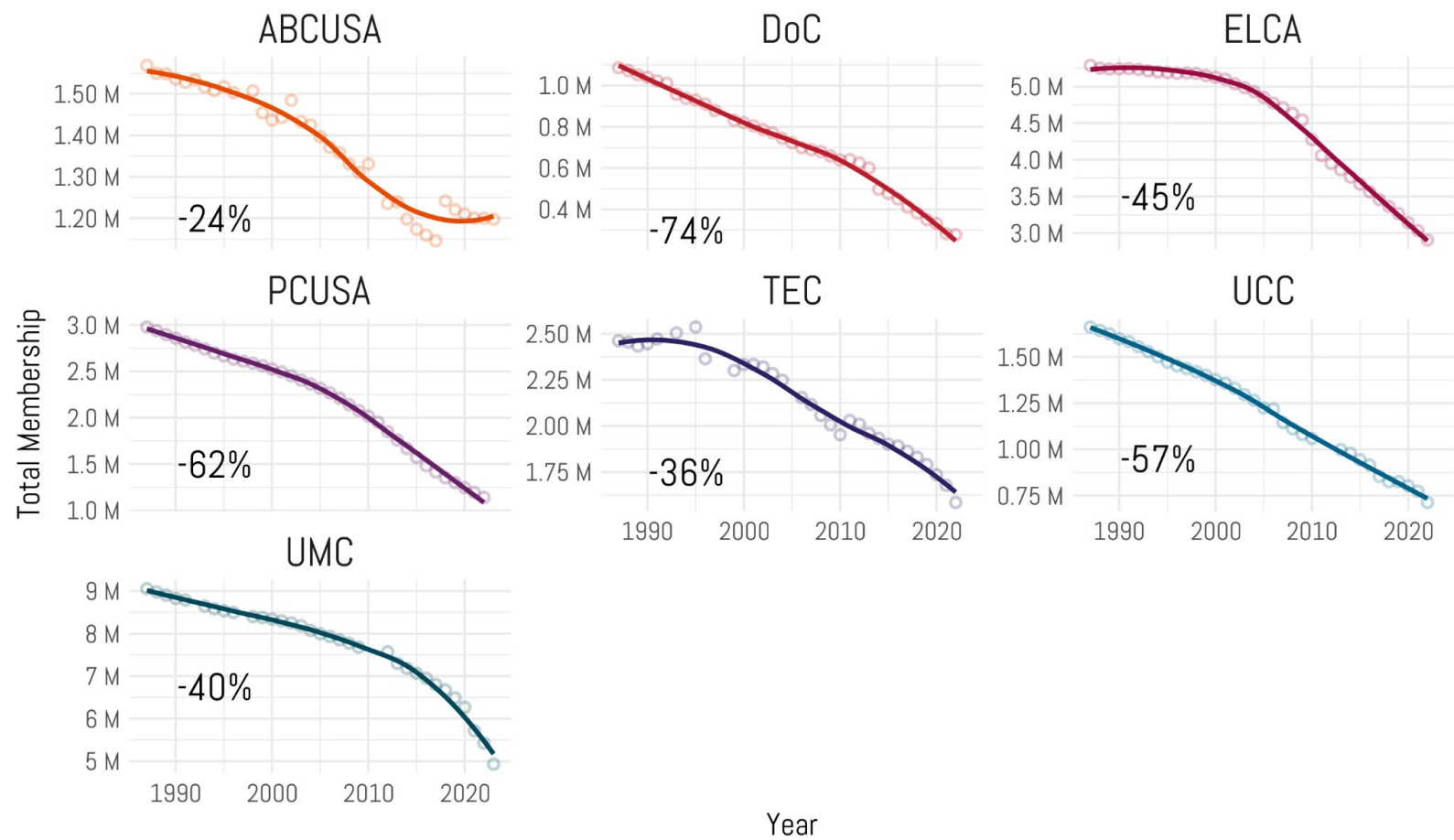


Improved mobility and connectability—walking to riding to clicking

# Religious affiliation



The Decline in Membership of the Mainline Between 1987 and 2022

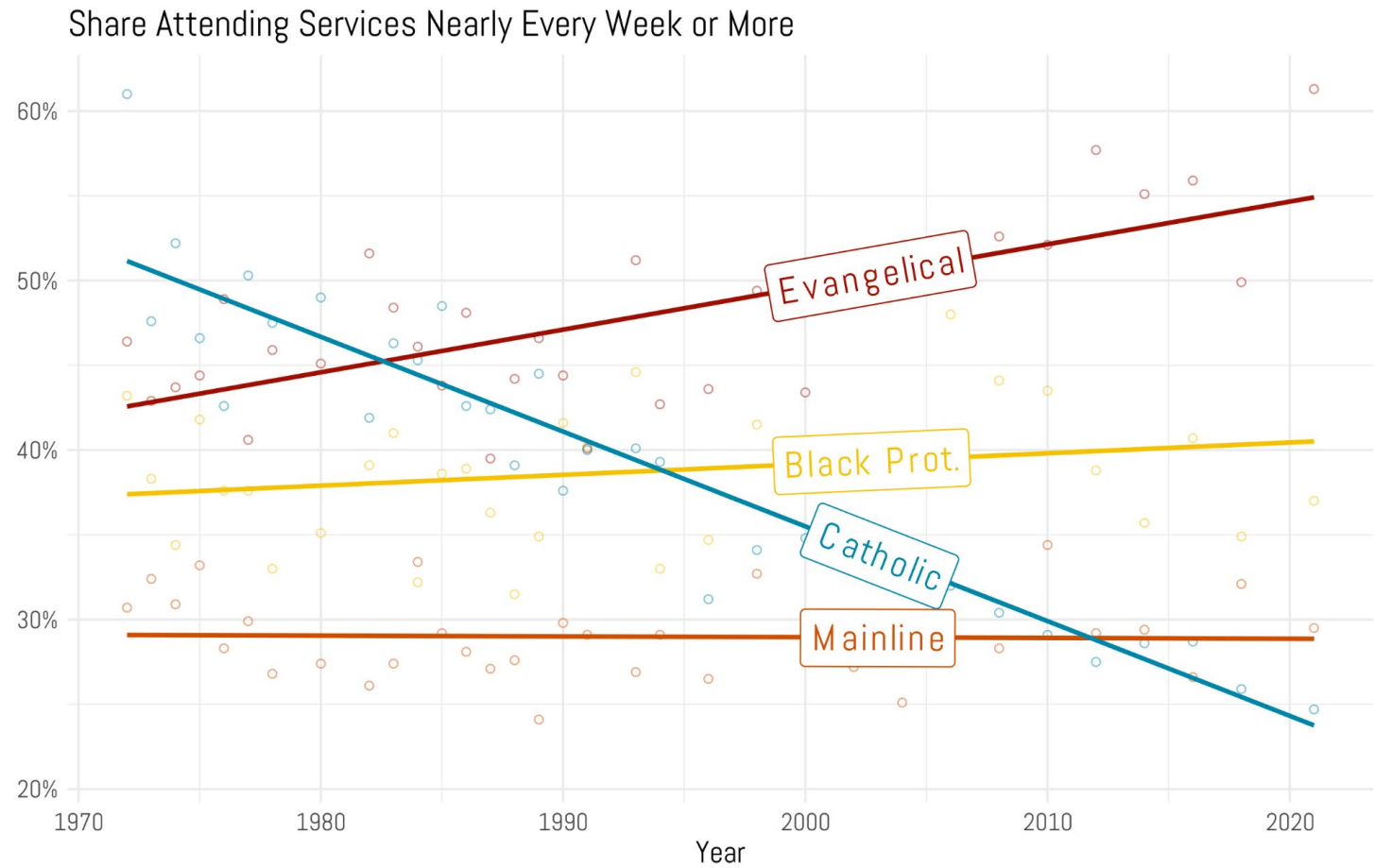


# Religious membership

@ryanburge  
Data: Denominational Records



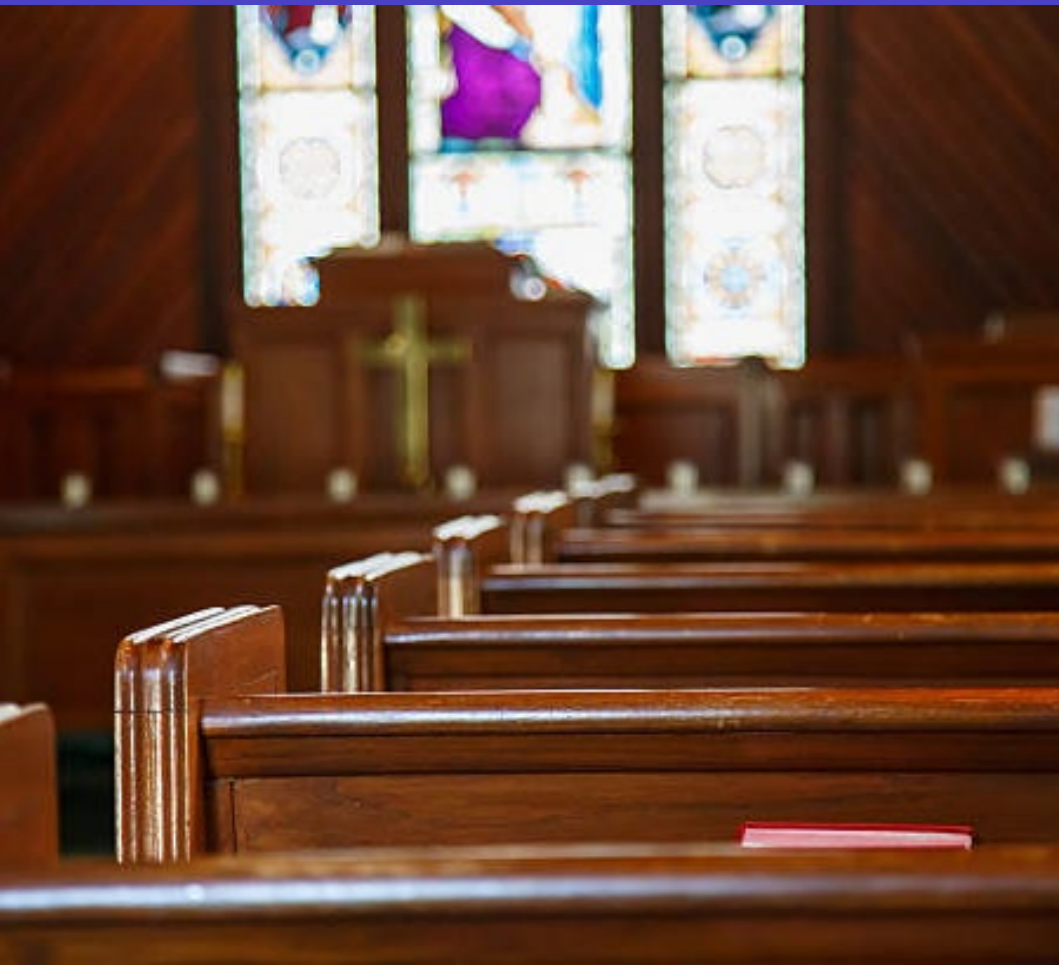
# Religious attendance



@ryanburge  
Data: General Social Survey, 1972-2021

Summary

# Examples



- NJ Methodists—530 churches w/20% in critical, 40% in serious, 40% in fair-to-good condition
- Ottumwa IA—8 closed downtown churches, only 3 successfully redeveloped, 3 more closing?
- Buffalo NY—bishop closed 70-90 Roman Catholic churches in the Diocese
- Minus 100K HOWs nationwide?

# The Great Steeple- chase





# Four hurdles

## Hurdle 1—Property and property market

- Description--needed repairs or replacement?
- Mortgages, liens, reversion clauses?
- Natural or manmade hazards?
- Graveyard? Need to subdivide?
- Demand by type and over time

## Hurdle 2—HOW and judicatory

- Readiness for change
- Rules of engagement
- Decisions: Church or judicatory?  
Lay or clergy?
- “Follow the money”
- Mission vs. money?
- Merger vs. closing?
- Church survivability

# Four hurdles

## Hurdle 3—Neighborhood and municipality

- Zoning
- Building codes
- Preservation ordinances
- Association rules
- Tax policies
- Master plan
- Next-door neighbors and neighborhood association
- Mayor, Councilmembers, professional staff

## Hurdle 4—Resources—financial and human

- Money—for pre-development
- Money—for development—hard debt, soft debt, equity, grants
- Money—for operations
- People—developers, financiers, attorneys, architects, builders

# Good examples Reuse



- St. Paul's United Methodist, Brick NJ—parish hall into pickleball courts
- Iowa City First Mennonite—football parking
- Silver Spring MD Viers Mill Baptist-- three immigrant congregations



# Good examples Redevelopment



Spiritual Brownfields

- Alexandria VA Church of the Resurrection—113 affordable apartments and a church
- Louisville St. Peter's United Church of Christ--Village@West Jefferson, 30K sf commercial development and a church
- Charlotte Sharon United Methodist—\$200M mixed-use redevelopment with office, residential, retail, and a church

# Good examples Recycling (Sales)



- Tampa First Presbyterian—\$5M
- Seattle First United Methodist--\$32M
- Miami First United Methodist--\$55M

# State laws to aid HOWs in reuse/redevelopment of property



WA—Substitute HB 1377—Faith Communities Resources for Affordable Housing—2023

CA—SB4—Affordable Housing on Faith Lands Act—2023

MD—HB 538—Housing Expansion and Affordability Act—2024

Also passed in OR; drafted in NY, VA, SC, KY, TX, CO, AZ, HI



# Local initiatives to aid HOWs in reuse redevelopment of property



In the forms of laws, money, intermediaries, and/or technical assistance:

Initiatives: Seattle, Portland, Pasadena CA, Sierra Madre CA, San Diego, San Antonio, Atlanta, Charlotte, New York City, Montgomery County MD

# Affordable housing? Go vs. pause

## Go

- Compelling need for affordable housing
- Property is well-configured
- HOW has strong culture
- Region is supportive
- HOW has extra space or is going out of business

## Pause

- Nearby retail and transit are limited
- Highest and best use results in a deal is too good to turn down
- Lengthy litigation likely
- Environmental or manmade hazards
- Weak, divided, indecisive congregation and/or judicatory

# Future needs



- Understand the huge scope of the problem
- Convince HOWs to get into the real-estate business
- Break out a new mixed-use HOW model
- Adopt flexible zoning, building-code, and property-tax policies
- Provide steady, stable, local, state and federal incentives--RUCHOW



# Questions and Comments?

