

PRAGMATIC USAGE OF CHURCHES, SCHOOLS AND OTHER BUILDINGS THROUGHOUT THE PROVINCE

This morning, I visited a church I hadn't attended in years, bringing a senior friend with mobility challenges. Despite difficult access, he unexpectedly reunited with an old classmate, which became the highlight of his visit. The large church, mostly attended by seniors, lacks a full-time pastor and relies on guest speakers. With my background in real estate, I couldn't help but note how underutilized and costly such a prime property is, as the church occupies only about a quarter of the space.

Christianity is declining in the Western Hemisphere for various reasons. This has resulted in many churches closing their doors and/or selling their property. But what if these properties could be repurposed by using excess space. As an example, one such purpose is to use the property for a nursing or special home; in doing so, you could free up several beds at DECH that are being used for ALC patients. This is a win-win situation. Many ALC patients could go to a home, and chronically ill patients would have a bed in the hospital. Emergency rooms could be redesigned to be more efficient.

Greater community involvement could help meet seniors' needs. Large houses might become community centres where residents and visiting seniors share meals, socialize and join activities. The possibilities are only limited by our creativity. As well, communities could beef up home care.

During a recent hospital visit, I was astonished by how many seniors were waiting in rooms and corridors—some required medical care, but many seemed to be waiting for beds elsewhere. Not only churches but also schools and other buildings across New Brunswick have unused space that could be repurposed.

I've long advocated for decentralized governance—not a return to pre-Robichaud times, but a hybrid approach where central government collaborates more closely with communities. Shifting more responsibility locally enables leaders to address needs and create practical solutions, especially in crises like ALC.

A few years ago, we invited Cormac Russell, social explorer and author, to New Brunswick. As the founding director of Natural Development and a member of Asset Based Community Development, he encourages communities to assess their assets and consider how best to use them. As Scotia Bank puts it, they may find they are richer than they think.

My aunt lived in a rural community with my uncle. As they grew older, daily life became more challenging. My uncle eventually stayed upstairs, where the bathroom was located, spending most of his final days there. Even though my aunt had a bad hip and leg, she still crawled up the stairs three times a day to bring him meals. This story highlights the importance of returning to basics and

finding practical ways to support the elderly. While standards and regulations are important, applying common sense is also essential.

When considering ALC supply-and-demand ratios, we should be cautious about constructing new facilities, as accommodating the aging Baby Boomer population may result in an excess of beds within 10–15 years.

Our province faces systemic issues and financial strain. Despite receiving around \$5 billion in transfer payments, we're still projected to run at least a \$1 billion deficit this year and for years to come. Oil revenues may decline soon, and there are geopolitical uncertainties with our southern neighbor. The Americans could be at our border sooner than later.

We must balance the budget by boosting our Gross Domestic Product, cutting overhead, or both. Self-sufficiency must be our modus operandi. Using underutilized building space is one possible solution; the cost savings could be as much as 50%. All it takes is action and determining who takes ownership. We could make a significant difference in a matter of months.

Daryl K. Branscombe, President

Community of Creative Citizens

Committee Members: Ken McGeorge, Dr. John Keddy, Diane Murray, Jim Carter and Wally Waller.