

# **Progressive Faith and Community Economies: A Yearlong Study of How the Progressive Church Is Interdependently Entangled with the World Around It**

## **The situation**

Progressive faith communities, as a small piece of what we might call "institutional faith" as a whole, are existentially endangered in the North American context. Private equity is interested in acquiring our assets, which represent valuable holdings in prime locations. Academia's knowledge and resources are being used to legitimize the transfer of church property and wealth to private hands, and to chart and publicize redevelopment initiatives that end the generational heritage of the institutional church. Meanwhile, progressive faith matters tremendously in this era, both in actuality and in potential.

## **The challenge**

We don't have much academic information about what the progressive church means to the communities it serves. Academia's role has thus far been limited to joining with those interests who have declared the religious left to be nonexistent or irrelevant or "already dead," and moving quickly to questions of how to divide and repurpose the assets.

As a religious leader and covenanted member of our shared faith, I see a different set of stories, as you likely do as well.

I am studying thriving church contexts across North America, particularly those who understand themselves to be adapting to a range of challenges including around their use of the physical spaces they occupy, or who identify as places where people gather to learn and engage in practices important for community building and democracy strengthening

## **The questions**

What do progressive churches do, and how does what we do shape and affect the actual feel and functions of the block, neighborhood, town and region that the church inhabits? How do the economics of church life play into what the church does? What does it look like to understand the exchanges of church and neighborhood life in ways broader and deeper than what orthodox capitalist economics frameworks are set up to see? In what ways, if any, do the neighboring and exchange functions of the progressive church protect and expand resilient democracy?

## **The research plan**

Your church is one of three Unitarian Universalist congregations in the United States and two United Church of Canada parishes in Newfoundland that have indicated preliminary interest (at this stage, usually voiced through your lead minister) in exploring these questions together. As we begin this project, we will do a consent process that we co-define together. You will notice that the word 'together' appears frequently in our shared work- it's because the research model we

will be using is community-participatory. This means that you co-own this, will co-define outcomes, and will retain a great deal of autonomy about how we work together, define success, and share our results with the world.

I will be at your church and part of your community for about ten weeks total between September 2025 and October 2026. My time with you might be spent in specific and fairly well-defined ways (working with a particular group or team, for example) or in more general capacities (simply embedded in life alongside you, observing, discussing, wondering, and mapping). This is up to your church: how would you like to participate?

I will join you for some weeks in the fall and for some weeks in the spring to gather data and co-lead process with you. In mid to late fall 2026, I will come back and we will do closure on the in-person shared pieces, which also launches us on the journey of writing and disseminating results and planning any next steps we'd like to take beyond simply publishing academic papers. The "we" here, as everywhere in this document, fully includes you. The next steps are unspecified because we don't yet know what they are!

Much is possible.

### **About Jordinn**

I live with my family in Rutland County, Vermont, and on the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland. I am a PhD candidate in cultural and economic geography at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, which is a comprehensive research university that mostly goes by its nickname "MUN" (rhymes with "fun"). At MUN, I work on a grant funded by the Canadian Government's Social Science and Humanities Research Council about church closure and the role of church buildings in community infrastructure. I am also an ordained UU minister and most recently served seven years in a seaside parish that used its big building to make a big impact. I have two teen sons who are strings players and rock climbers, and whose heart landscapes include both metro Kansas City, where they spent their earliest childhood, and the mountains and fields of Vermont.