



# THE ECONOMIC HALO EFFECT OF SACRED PLACES

*Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
Buffalo, NY*



AT THE INTERSECTION  
OF HERITAGE, FAITH,  
& COMMUNITY

**Partners for Sacred Places**

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# METHODOLOGY

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In 1996, with the support of Lilly Endowment, Inc. and other funders, Partners for Sacred Places conducted the first scientific study quantifying the value of space and other resources that congregations provide to outreach programs housed in their historic and older buildings. Conducted in partnership with Dr. Ram Cnaan and the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice, this study, *Sacred Places at Risk*, found that an average urban congregation generates over \$140,000 per year in value by providing space and other resources to outreach programs, including volunteer time; building space rented at less than market rates; and cash and in-kind donations to support community-serving programs. The study also found that four out of five individuals who are served by programs hosted by a sacred place come from outside the congregation.

*Sacred Places at Risk* established a new methodology for documenting a portion of the public value of congregations and led to a new course of study, marked by Dr. Cnaan's book, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership*, and further validated with the publication of *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* and *The Other Philadelphia Story: How Local Congregations Support Quality of Life in Urban America*.

Though groundbreaking, *Sacred Places at Risk* and subsequent works did not attempt to quantify the full range of economic impacts that congregations have on their communities. *The Economic Halo Effect of Sacred Places* does.

In 2010, Partners was funded by the William Penn Foundation to test the concept of an expanded methodology. Partners again collaborated with Dr. Cnaan and the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice to craft a comprehensive approach to quantifying the public value of congregations. The pilot, conducted in Philadelphia, sought to take into consideration factors such as: local spending and support for area businesses; building maintenance and repair costs; visitor spending; activities that promote community economic development; impact on the lives of community members; and the value of green space and recreation space.

Based on an extensive review of available, academically-vetted methodologies, the team identified nearly two dozen quantifiable measures of economic impact relevant to congregations stewarding historic and older sacred places, and assembled a singular methodology to pilot in Philadelphia. The results of this pilot were published in 2013 in the scholarly, peer-reviewed *Journal of Management, Spirituality, and Religion*.

With funding from Lilly Endowment, Inc., the McCormick Foundation, and others, Partners built upon the pilot by undertaking a larger study. This study differed from the first in that congregations were selected at random from three large cities (Chicago, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth). The results were published in November of 2016.

Partners found that the average historic sacred place in an urban environment generates over \$1.7 million annually in economic impact. With over 700 active historic houses of worship each in Chicago and Philadelphia, and close to 350 in Fort Worth, *this translates into over \$3 billion in annual impact for the three cities combined*.

Congregations employ, on average, 5 full-time and 6 part-time staff, and purchase goods and services from a network of local small businesses and individual vendors, sustaining an important community economic ecosystem. Each sacred place is also a magnet for visitors, attracting 780 visits on average each week into its neighborhood or locale. These visits, whether for worship services, life events such as weddings and funerals, concerts and recitals, outreach programs, and other activities, generate spending that boosts the local economy. People spend on travel to and from the sacred place and often patronize local stores nearby. And most importantly, perhaps, we found that 87% of the beneficiaries of the community programs and events housed in sacred places are not members of the religious congregation. They are members of the community at large.

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo Church (UUCB) is a historic sacred place in Buffalo, NY. Designed by prominent architect Edward Austin Kent in 1906, the property has served as a spiritual home and community anchor for over 100 years.

This report provides an estimation of UUCB's annual impact on the economy of Buffalo. It is based on an interview process conducted in summer of 2024 with key leadership.

The *Economic Halo Effect of Sacred Places* considers dozens of factors, which are summarized into thematic categories below.

Benefit Type	Description	Calculation
Direct Spending	Spending on operations and building maintenance is funneled into the local economy.	\$565,735
Education	If, for example, a congregation operates an early childhood education program or school, it benefits the local economy by freeing parents to work and lowering the cost to each taxpayer.	\$0
Open Space	Green space and recreation space improve our environment and lower energy costs.	\$170,190
Magnet Effect	Hosting events and operating programs catalyzes visitor spending.	\$454,994
Individual Impact	Intervening in individuals' lives enables people to work and reduces governmental spending.	\$106,420
Invisible Safety Net	Operating and hosting community-oriented programs supplements the activity of the local government and social service agencies, adding value to the community.	\$331,682
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$1,629,021</b>

## Direct Spending

Sacred places drive their local and regional economies through purchasing goods and services and by employing area residents. In fact, studies have demonstrated that upwards of 80% of a given congregation's budget is spent in the region – often with small, locally owned businesses and vendors.

In an average year, UUCB spends at least **\$565, 735** in the region and employs 12 people (including full-time, part-time, and contract employees). This total represents the annual operating budget as well as capital projects that enhance UUCB's ability to serve others via its physical plant. Since 2019, UUCB has spent over \$100,000 on building repairs outside of routine maintenance.

## Education

Sacred places support their local economies through operating affordable, high quality early childhood education and K through 12 schooling. The former enables at least one parent per participating student to work while the latter provides cost savings to the public school system. In Partners' three-city study, Education accounted for a very significant portion of the total impact made by historic sacred places: 39.8%. Please note that UUCB's other programs may have educational value, but they are not monetized under Education because of the particular way in which Education is calculated.

## Open Space

In urban neighborhoods especially, churches may maintain the only green space or recreation space. Access to green or recreation space can be monetized on a per use basis, depending on the quality and characteristics of the space. UUCB offers a sizable lawn and garden landscape which is used for both occasional outdoor events as well as a place for more informal rest and gathering. In total, Open Space accounted for **\$170,190** or 10% of UUCB's impact. This is significantly higher than Partners' three-city findings, which determined that Open Space accounts for an important but minor portion of a congregation's total impact (on average, 0.1%).

## Magnet Effect

Urban congregations attract visitors for the purposes of worship, education, programming, and special events – and UUCB is no exception. In addition to regular worshippers who meet weekly, UUCB opens its doors to public events and rite of passage celebrations throughout the year. These events are well-attended and draw a significant number of visitors over the average year. One example, Casual Concerts, are monthly events free to the public which feature guest musicians from a range of musical backgrounds.

Throughout the year, visitors spend money in the vicinity of the building on food and drink, gasoline or public transportation (including rideshare), entertainment, and sometimes lodging. Small, locally owned businesses often benefit from visits by UUCB's members and visitors, including, and many more.

In Buffalo, overnight visitors spend an average of \$175 per day and day visitors spend an average of \$69 per day.<sup>1</sup> In a typical year, visitors to UUCB spend **\$454, 994** in the region. Partners takes into consideration where visitors are coming from

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<sup>1</sup> "FY 2023 per Diem Rates for Buffalo, New York." GSA. Accessed 10 May. 2024.

(whether they are overnighters, day visitors, or locals) when calculating this total to ensure a conservative estimate that accurately reflects the site's impact on spending in the vicinity of the building.

## Individual Impact

Partners recognizes that, outside of the programs offered by congregations, clergy, program staff, and lay volunteers provide one-on-one counseling to members of both the parish and the community at large. Congregations help unemployed individuals find employment; help couples work through difficulties and intervene in abusive relationships; help those struggling with substance use disorder find and enter treatment; provide support to immigrants and refugees; and sometimes provide sanctuary to immigrants facing deportation. Congregations also function as a social safety net for people in society who are in need of connection and community -especially youth and older adults.

Of course, it is impossible to put a dollar value on human life. However, the interventions described above can be monetized on an individual basis in cases in which the congregation's intervention undoubtedly resulted in measurable change.<sup>2</sup>

At **\$106,420** Individual Impact accounts for **7%** of UUCB's total impact.

## Invisible Safety Net

Congregations create a 'safety net' for those most at risk within their communities - and this is not always visible to the public at large. Congregations do this by operating and hosting community-serving programming and sharing space with others at affordable, below market rates. At **\$331,682**, Invisible Safety Net accounts for **20%** of UUCB's total impact.

Historic sacred places are uniquely able to accommodate a variety of users (even simultaneously!) because they typically include spaces that range in size and purpose - from worship spaces designed to accommodate large gatherings to education wings designed to accommodate smaller group settings. UUCB is no exception—a significant portion (approximately 60%) of the Invisible Safety Net total can be attributed to UUCB opening its doors to other groups at very affordable, below market rates. The architecturally unique and spacious sanctuary serves as a one-of-a kind venue for musical performance, where spaces such as the Marjorie Gardner Room are well equipped to host local meetings and support groups. In the past year, over 30 organizations have benefitted from this part of UUCB's mission including the Food Not Bombs, Girl Scouts, Narcotics Anonymous, the Queen City Contra Dancers, and many more.

The robustness of UUCB's space-sharing highlights the strength of UUCB's diverse community connections. In addition to welcoming others into their space, the congregation also plays a pivotal role in providing volunteer and in-kind support to community-serving programs led by others. For example, UUCB's program, "Share the Plate," donates half of the monthly plate collection to local not-for-profits. Last year, over \$12,500 was invested in local organizations as a result of the program.

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<sup>2</sup> Cnaan, Ram A., Forest, Tuomi, Carlsmith, Joseph, and Karsh, Kelsey. "If you do not count it, it does not count: A pilot study of valuing urban congregations." *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* 10, no.1 (2013).

# HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

## Understanding What the Data Is & Is Not

The *Economic Halo Effect* is about communicating impact in new terms - and speaking the language of economic impact, which resonates with a wide range of people (including those who aren't people of faith and those who aren't interested in older buildings). Leaders in philanthropy and government, for example, might be persuaded to support or collaborate with a church that has an important impact on the health and vitality of its community. Most people know that congregations are important community anchors that serve those who are most in need, but few know that congregations make a measurable economic impact.

*Halo* cannot measure everything that congregations do.<sup>3</sup> It does measure the economic value of community-serving programming (from the volunteer time to the donated goods that fuel these programs); activities that generate economic activity in the area (such as hosting events of all kinds); and local spending. However, it does not measure the impact of a religious building's presence on adjacent property values; the value of being a unique, affordable place in the community where folks come together; or a congregation's long-term impact on the lives of members and neighbors.

Although *Halo* is not a comprehensive measure of your value to your community, it can help you think of your congregation in new ways, elevate the way that civic leaders perceive you, and aid in both internal and external fundraising efforts.

## Uses for Halo

- **Share the results with your congregation.** Congregants may be encouraged to hear that their faithful giving and work has a measurable impact in the larger community. It can potentially boost morale and may even boost giving to your church. Most people need to hear a message multiple times before truly absorbing it. Consider placing this information in newsletters and in announcements. You might want to build a sermon around it. Make this information available multiple times, and in multiple ways.
- **Share the results with the 10% of folks who do 90% of the work of the congregation, and use it as an opportunity to thank them for what they do.** Almost every church is indebted to a core group of dedicated congregants who are the first to step up and serve on a leadership team or donate time to an initiative. These folks do not always see the impact of their efforts.
- **Highlight the *Halo* findings to strengthen your annual stewardship campaign or capital campaign.** Partners frequently supports congregations through capital campaigns and projects, and in order to fundraise successfully, a congregation must be able to articulate *why it matters* and *why its project matters*. *Halo* data can bolster your case for support and make for a more successful campaign - especially if your campaign will be

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<sup>3</sup> Each question we ask during the interview is tied to a multiplier derived from an existing, peer reviewed scholarly study. Some issues have been thoroughly studied by scholars, and others less so.

community-based. Community-based capital campaigns entail going beyond the congregation for support, and therefore require you to articulate your civic value.

- **Incorporate the results into grant applications.** If your church is applying for a grant, use the *Halo* data to emphasize that you are a worthy candidate that is positioned to make the most of the gift. *Halo* data can be persuasive to donors and foundations of all kinds - and sometimes even to funders that traditionally do not make grants to faith-based organizations.
- **Share the results with local civic leaders.** If your numbers surprised you, request a meeting with local civic leaders to share the results. *Halo* findings will likely surprise them, too. This is a good opportunity to demonstrate that your church merits a seat at the table when conversations are taking place that may affect the church or where there may be opportunity for the church to be a resource to the neighborhood or city.
- **Share the results with local media.** Raise your profile in the community at large by getting the word out via local media. Craft your message carefully and utilize any connections you may have to reach local reporters. Timing is key when it comes to publicizing the *Halo* data; it is a good way generate interest in a major event the church is planning or a capital campaign that would benefit from public support.
- **Advocate for your tax-exempt status, funding eligibility, or zoning changes.** Local governments throughout the United States are looking for new sources of income and for ways to cut costs. If you find your church needs to advocate for your longtime tax-exempt status or your eligibility for funding, or you want to update the property's zoning classification to permit new activities on site, *Halo* data may prove valuable in helping you make the case.

## ABOUT PARTNERS FOR SACRED PLACES

Partners for Sacred Places, founded in 1989, is the only national, non-sectarian, nonprofit organization focused on building the capacity of congregations of historic sacred places so that they can better serve their communities as anchor institutions, nurture transformation, and shape vibrant, creative communities.

Partners for Sacred Places brings together a national network of expert professionals who understand the value of a congregation's architectural assets, its worth as a faith community, and the significance of its service to the community at large. With a national presence based in Philadelphia and Chicago, Partners fosters the active community use of historic sacred places - churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques - and builds the capability of their congregations through training programs and fundraising assistance. Partners has served thousands of congregations and related organizations over the past thirty years and represents the needs and concerns of over 100,000 older, community-serving sacred places across America.

For more information about our work, please visit us on the web at [www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org).