St. Stephen's Olean Recognized for Creative Reuse of Church Space

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Olean will be among the featured sites at the 2026 Chusid Symposium on Place, an annual gathering exploring how communities are creatively using their physical spaces to strengthen community life.

The invitation comes in recognition of St. Stephen's renovation and redevelopment of the Watson Center, an effort to reimagine church property as a resource not only for the congregation, but for the wider Olean community.

Hosted by the Susan Christopherson Center for Community Planning, this year's symposium will highlight sites across Allegany, Cattaraugus, and Chautauqua counties where "diverse voices engage with economic development, heritage, climate resiliency and equity to recognize and build place and a sense of community."

For St. Stephen's, participation in the symposium offers an opportunity to share what the parish has learned through the Watson Center project—and perhaps to inspire other congregations wrestling with an increasingly important question: How might our church buildings serve the communities around them in new ways?

"We are all looking for ways to engage our church buildings in new ways," said Mary Plonka of St. Stephen's. "This symposium is an opportunity to be inspired by what others are doing and to imagine how we might grow our own participation in the community."
The Chusid Symposium on Place will be held Friday, October 2, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Palmer Opera House in Cuba, New York, with registration beginning at 9:30 a.m. A social hour will follow from 4 to 5:30 p.m.

The day will include presentations, panel discussions, site tours, and opportunities for conversation with people engaged in creative community development throughout the region. Among the featured places are the Palmer Opera House, Pioneer Oil Museum, Fassett GreenSpace, Robert H. Jackson Center, Tri-County Arts Center, and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

The event is free, with breakfast and lunch provided, but advance registration is required.
For congregations throughout the diocese considering how their buildings might become more deeply connected to the life of their neighborhoods, the gathering offers a chance to learn, imagine—and perhaps see familiar spaces with new eyes.

Invitation link is here:
https://mailchi.mp/christophersoncenter/youre-invitedchusid-symposium-on-place-october2