

THINKING FLEXIBLY ABOUT OUR BUILDINGS

“Pastor, I love this building. It evokes a special memory every time I enter. It’s one of the main reasons I joined this church. It’s my image of what a church should look like. I hope nothing ever happens to change it.” Such words can strike fear in a pastor or church team contemplating an overdue renovation. Yet renovate we must. The landscape is littered with church buildings that were built long before our children or grandchildren were born. One church renovation expert notes that in most of his projects it has been at least thirty years since any part of the facilities has been refurbished in any way.¹ It’s better to assess the building on a regular basis to be sure that its size, shape, and function fit the congregation’s mission to the community. This calls for flexible thinking, which means letting go of rigidity and recalling the roots of our faith as a nomadic people.

Recognize Rigidity

Remaining rigid in our view of how a church space should function can limit our ability to flourish. There are three primary reasons we tend to gravitate toward rigidity instead of flexibility.

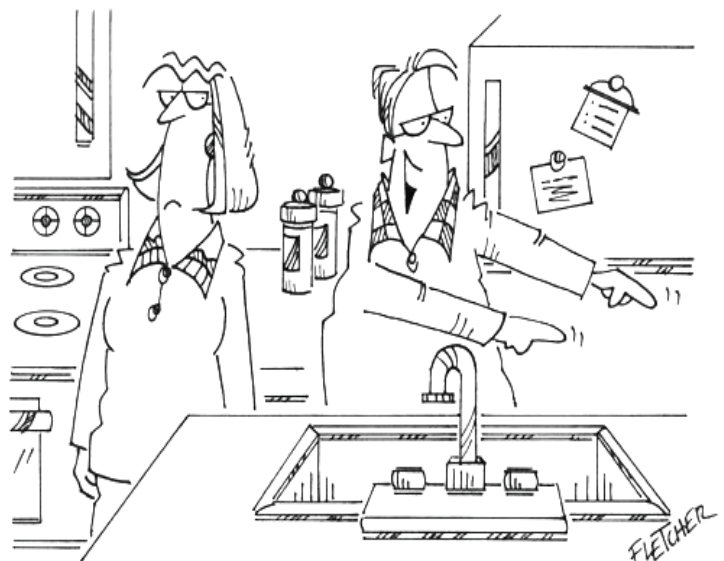
1. **Viewing the building as unalterable.** Richard Giles, in a book on redesigning church buildings, relates the challenges faced by British producers of a TV drama set in the Edwardian era (1901-1910). To gain an authentic look, it was necessary to remove every sign of modern life from the village where the drama was set. However, nothing had to be changed inside the village church, which appeared as if it had been frozen in time. Serving as a priest in Philadelphia, Giles observed similar tendencies in U.S. churches toward a “fossilization” of the space.²
2. **Giving in to building anxiety.** Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis, says that many of her pastoral conversations focus on the troubles caused by owning a building. “Buildings come with all kinds of anxiety, because often people don’t know what to

do about them.”³ The roof falls in, a flood occurs, or some other emergency prompts conversations about future action.

3. **Forgetting the congregation’s purpose.** When a roof collapse prompts questions about how to finance the costly upkeep of an aging building, the prior question should be: What is this congregation’s unique mission to the community that is being impeded by these costly repairs? The book, *Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message* outlines a discernment process that must take place prior to any building project. Ask, Who are we as a congregation? (identity), Who are our neighbors? (demographics), and Who is God calling us to be? (mission).⁴

Reclaim Flexibility

The Christian faith has its origins in the semi-nomadic life of our ancestors. Abraham and Sarah went forth in response to the divine promise, and the Israelites in the Book of Exodus carried the Ark with its tablets from



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place to place and erected a tent for worship wherever they found themselves. The place of worship was portable and the faithful encountered God on the move. Later, the establishment of the Temple and the synagogue expressed another aspect of religious practice and a more settled one. However, Jesus held an ambivalent attitude toward sacred buildings, and his earliest followers borrowed places to meet or modified their homes to become permanent meeting places, such as the house at Dura Europos (AD 232) in Syria. Only after the Emperor Constantine (AD 313) declared Christianity the state religion were larger, monumental structures built to express the church's growing influence. Flexible thinking about our buildings is rooted in these earlier expressions of faith.⁵

Get Started with Bible Study

Flexible thinking is not only a part of our history, but it is also a part of the biblical message. Lay a theological foundation for renovating the sanctuary or other parts of the church building through a six-week Bible study.⁶

1. **Tent or Temple.** Read Numbers 9:15-23; 1 Samuel 7:1-13; 2 Chronicles 6:18-21; Mark 11:15-17; and Mark 13:1-2. Discuss the tension between tent and temple, nomadic and static traditions, and explore Jesus' attitude to the Temple. Group project: arrange to hold worship in a different setting from the sanctuary and assess it in light of our nomadic tradition.
2. **The Environment of Change.** Read James 4:13-14 and Hebrews 13:12-14. Discuss the technological and social changes that have taken place in the life of class members. Should the church be a bastion of stability or an agent of change? Group project: visit worship services in other churches, one traditional and one progressive.
3. **The Church Building.** Read Luke 4:16 and Luke 9:57-58. The word "church" is commonly used to describe the building and the people, yet the building must serve the people. Is our building in the right place? Is it the right building? Group project: visit a faith community that uses a secular building (such as a former warehouse or parking garage) as its gathering place.
4. **The Hospitable Church.** Read Luke 19:1-5; Acts 16:14-15; and Revelation 19:6-9. A central theme of the New Testament is the sharing of a meal together. How welcoming is our congregation? Does the building entrance need to be rede-

signed to be more welcoming? Group project: invite members of another church to attend worship and ask them to fill out a simple survey on their experience of hospitality.

5. **The Teaching Church.** Read Numbers 21:8 and John 12:32. What sign or symbol dominates the worship space, or is it a confusing mix of symbols? Does the placement of the altar table, the lectern or pulpit, and the seating plan foster participation or simply observation? Group project: visit a church that has recently rearranged or renovated its church building, such as its sanctuary, dining area, or entrance foyer.
6. **The Transformed Church.** Read Matthew 17:1-8 and 1 Peter 2:9-10. In light of this study, explore a vision for renovating the building so that it fits your congregation's particular ministry to the community. Group project: plan a teach-in for the broader church or planning retreat for leadership.

For Reflection

Is your church building in the right place? Is it the right building? When was the last time your church building was renovated? Was it done in response to catastrophe or the result of planning for the congregation's mission to the community?

Resource

Partners for Sacred Places. 2021. *Transitioning Older and Historic Sacred Places: Community-Minded Approaches for Congregations and Judicatories*. Electronic publication. 72 pages. <https://sacredplaces.org/info/publications/transitioning-older-and-historic-sacred-places/>

1. Karl Vaters, "Churches Renovate Their Building, On Average, Every 30 Years? Really?!" *Pivot*, May 9, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2018/may/churches-renovate-on-average-every-30-years.html?paging=off>

2. Richard Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Church Buildings for Worship and Mission* (Norwich, Norfolk, U.K.: Canterbury Press, 2004), 4.

3. "Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows: Congregations Should See Their Buildings as Assets, Not Albatrosses," *Faith and Leadership*, February 9, 2021, <https://faithandleadership.com/jennifer-baskerville-burrows-congregations-should-see-their-buildings-assets-not-albatrosses>

4. Nancy DeMott, Tim Shapiro, and Brent Bill, *Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 9-57. For a summary of the process, see *The Parish Paper*, June 2021, "Is it Time to Relocate?"

5. Giles., 9-52.

6. *Ibid.*, 240-245.