

Clutter buster: A church clears a path

by [Barbara Melosh](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue



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Yes, we all know that the church is not a building or a steeple. Yet I believe that a church building is often an outward and visible sign of a congregation's spiritual condition. I learned this during my pastorate at Saints and Sinners (not its real name), when I spent more time on property concerns than I had ever imagined possible. Like many city congregations, Saints and Sinners is getting smaller and smaller and losing ground in the struggle to maintain a large aging building. As one colleague put it, "A lot of us are one furnace failure away from closing."

When I first walked into Saints and Sinners, I knew that I was in a worship space cherished by church members. The large brick structure was rebuilt after a fire in the late 1930s. It's a handsome building trimmed in peach marble, with a steep slate roof rising to a steeple topped with a cross. On one corner, oak doors decorated with intricate wrought-iron hinges open onto stairs leading up to the narthex. Light filtered through blue and red stained-glass windows and rested on oak pews and a pulpit of elaborately carved wood.

Even here, though, I saw signs of decline. The altar was covered by a crumpled altar cloth under scratched Plexiglas. A three-quarter-sized plaster Jesus stood with eyes downcast and arms outstretched; on his right hand, three fingers were broken off. The dull red carpet was threadbare in places; when we replaced it we discovered that it was more than 50 years old. Near the entrance was a deep scorch mark in the shape of an iron, probably left by someone trying to remove wax from the carpet.

The rest of the building registered decline more acutely. Painted walls were scuffed and peeling. Carpeting was worn and stained—and clutter was overtaking the place.

I can relate. Like many of us, I'm overwhelmed by my own accumulation of stuff, and congregations are the same. As one colleague astutely observed, people feel free to leave items in church buildings, but no one takes responsibility for getting rid of anything. Partly it's a matter of will and energy. But it's also a question of ownership. Members don't feel they have the authority to get rid of anything. Besides, we tell ourselves mournfully, no one is using the old youth room anyway, so . . .

More than once our church received unsolicited "donations"—bags of clothing left on the steps, a tattered, overstuffed chair that we had to call the city to remove. But most of the stuff comes from our members. Usually they have some vague notion that the church will find their discarded items useful or pass them on to someone who will. Sometimes the stuff is left over from one of our flea markets. Many members live in small row houses that have little storage space, so they use the church. The parsonage contained two cabinet sewing machines belonging to a member who had no place for them but didn't want to get rid of them. A large part of the church basement was a makeshift workspace that held tools used by members for repairs and property projects—and many other tools stored there by a church member. We also had several members who never came across an object that didn't suggest a likely potential for future use—and then brought it to the church.

When I arrived I explored the building and discovered one large storage closet packed from top to bottom with plastic grocery bags; another was filled with boxes of glass water pitchers. Stacks of milk cartons held empty jars. In the basement narrow trails led through teetering piles of rusty buckets, televisions, small appliances and tools.

The clutter had claimed what the congregation called the Scout room, although Boy Scouts had not convened there for years. A mildewed couch and matching chairs in faded blue velour hid a gorgeous stone fireplace. I found a display case filled with trophies won by a congregational softball team. A large locked metal cabinet contained karaoke equipment.

In a large Sunday school room across the hall, storage cabinets held craft supplies, including yellowing paper and tins filled with thousands of crayons. The walls were covered with a dozen warped bulletin boards, along with framed 1950s illustrations of Bible stories and an oversized print of the beloved Warner Sallman portrait of Jesus.

In my first few months at Saints and Sinners, I gathered a few people to do long-term planning. Clearing these rooms was on the list of goals; I wasn't the only one who saw the clutter as a problem. Still, I knew that the job wasn't going to be easy.

A dedicated volunteer who spent hours managing the building was also the congregation's most avid collector. He resisted any effort to get rid of "stuff." We were also challenged by the watchdogs of the budget—long-standing members who stalwartly opposed any initiative that involved spending money. The enthusiasm of our brainstorming sessions began to wane. No one, including me, wanted to lead a project that was bound to stir up more than dust.

But one Sunday morning a thirty-something mother appeared with a winsome five-year-old, and I showed them the way to the Sunday school class. As I led her into the room I saw her reaction to the mess. She backed out abruptly, pulling her son by the hand. Seeing the room through her eyes filled me with new resolve. The stuff had to go.

I called together my troops, two women who had been chafing at the mess for a while. Charlene was a resourceful and determined clutter buster with an impressive range of home repair skills and a boundless enthusiasm for home decoration. Georgia was a professional interior designer with a Rolodex of contacts. Together we reviewed paint and carpet samples and sought out bids. Somehow we persuaded our council to approve the funds.

We spirited away the mildewed furniture and relocated a few large items that we were keeping. But then the project went into a stall with mountains of stuff still in place. No one would take responsibility for sorting through the troves and deciding

what to throw out. With irritation tinged with begrudging admiration, I realized I had been outmaneuvered; the congregation was giving me a lesson in the power of passive resistance. The painters were scheduled to arrive in a week, and there was no way I could muscle out all that stuff myself.

Then, just as I was beginning to despair, the Lord provided me with a couple of ringers. My 21-year-old son called to ask if I could help a friend who'd been remanded to 40 hours of community service. Did I have something the miscreant could do?

Did I ever! I explained the project. The next day my son and his friend arrived, and for five days in the middle of an August heat wave they attacked the clutter. As fans churned, the guys dismantled bulletin boards, unscrewed light fixtures, moved furniture and pulled up the dirty carpets, releasing clouds of dust. We hauled bag after bag of trash out of the rooms.

We tried to preserve what was valuable—the Sunday school banner that looked to be 1920s vintage, faded snapshots of Sunday school kids who were now teenagers, and of course, the softball trophies.

The next week painters and carpet installers arrived. In the Sunday school room, the multihued carpet picked up the muted blue-green of the walls. In the Scouts room, the same shade set off the gray stone of the fireplace. I found myself returning again and again to marvel at the transformation.

That Sunday I asked the congregation to come downstairs after worship to help move bookcases and tables back into the rooms. As people filed downstairs, I watched eagerly for their reactions. Charlene and Georgia stood off to the side, looking guarded.

One person after another came into the Sunday school room carrying tables, chairs and bookshelves. But no one said anything. Their faces were unreadable.

In growing consternation I went over to one member who was carrying chairs. “So, what do you think?” I asked, trying for a brightly casual tone.

“Um, who picked the colors?” he asked carefully.

Then, from his mother-in-law: “It looks like a circus tent!”

In earshot of this review, Georgia looked grim and Charlene flushed unhappily. But if anyone else in the congregation had an opinion about the makeover, I never heard it.

Exhausted by the project and the congregation's impassive reception of it, I raged inwardly. I felt ignored—and upset on behalf of Charlene and Georgia, who had taken risks for the project. They said that this was just how the people were at Saints and Sinners—stolid Germans who seldom offered praise. I decided that the response was a register of the cost of change. Most people knew that the rooms had been neglected, but some were angry or shamed when a few of us acted to clear them out. Maybe there was pain in the letting-go even when people knew that the letting-go was necessary.

The next day the phone rang. A young mother had moved into the neighborhood and wondered if we had a room that could be used for a parent-and-toddlers group. I startled her with a burst of laughter and then said yes, I thought we had a space that would work.

The choir moved out of its cramped space and into the Boy Scouts room. At first they complained. The acoustics were unfamiliar, and they missed the intimacy of their old room. But then a newcomer appeared and wanted to join the choir, and in the new space there was room for the additional chair and music stand. The week after that, another member joined.

In the next few years we took on a few more property projects. Each one was received with grumbling at the planning stage and silence at completion. Yet every time, these changes opened up space that was filled with new life. Toddler groups, kids' music classes, a yoga class and even a community theater were meeting in our building. Visitors complimented us on the building's appearance, and neighbors appreciated the congregation's welcome of community groups.

I'd like to say that the congregation ultimately embraced these changes. But some members resented and still resent the newcomers. Conflict over the use of the building escalated. People are even more reluctant to assume responsibility for property matters. And of course, more clutter has begun to accumulate in the basement.

I realized that I had to accept the uneven reactions even as I—and many others—celebrated the results of change. Yes, I still believe that a church is not a

building. But buildings matter a lot. They are signs of our spiritual condition and resources for our ministries. Our challenge is to use them well, so that they are not monuments but living stones, sheltering and nurturing new life.