

Keeping the church weird

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue



*Oude Kerk*, or old church, in Amsterdam, hosts the 2013 World Press Photo contest, among other arts events. The 800-year-old building is still home to a congregation. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Joop Reuvecamp](#).

When we imagine what a church can become, there is one thing that can be a great liability or a considerable asset: the church building itself. It can be difficult to know what to do with the stained glass and soaring ceilings, especially when a congregation needs a new mission and ministry.

I began to understand some of the complexities when I ate lunch with a real estate agent who specializes in selling historic properties in Austin, Texas. She had a passion for “keeping Austin weird,” which is shorthand for keeping the corporate franchises at bay while allowing the local arts and sense of history. When our conversation moved to contemplating the future of the church, I began to talk about buildings.

“The bricks and mortar have become a noose around our necks,” I said, shaking my head. “Congregations spend so much money on sanctuaries that seat 700, while they’re lucky to get 50 people showing up on a Sunday. They can’t afford a pastor or any mission, because all their money is going to plumbing patches and roof repairs.”

I imagined tearing down the churches and building structures that would be green and sustainable.

“We could have a competition. Architects could come up with a prefab sanctuary that we could construct on an empty lot. Then we could have low-cost sanctuary kits available.” I continued to explain my plan until I noticed my friend’s discomfort.

“Most of our landfill waste comes from building deconstruction,” she interjected. “We can’t just keep adding to that. These old buildings are well made and historic. You can’t just tear them down. Surely we can think of new uses for them.”

I realized my friend wanted to keep the church weird. I also understood that the issue was more complicated than my slash-and-burn approach allowed. However, the questions still remain. What should we do when a congregation can no longer afford a pastor, ministry, *and* a building?

Julia Groom, president of the Episcopal Church Building Fund, spends a lot of time trying to enliven people’s imaginations when it comes to church buildings and ministry.

“We are so emotionally tied to our buildings,” Groom said. “When we get to the point when we can’t afford the building and the clergy, we cut the clergy to save the building. We are preserving monuments instead of doing mission and ministry.”

Groom asks congregations to reassess all of their space and start thinking about its purpose. “Why not use the building for something worthwhile—a critical mission? We aren’t country clubs.”

The fund started an annual symposium, “Buildings for a New Tomorrow,” to foster an honest, denomination-wide discussion about structures, including the question, “Do we need them?”

Groom told me about a church in Belen, New Mexico.

The fund asked the church “to look at the community and find out what it needed,” Groom explained. The church members knew that on Friday nights at 7 there was nowhere to go in town except to a bar. So they invited people to hang out at the parish house, where there would be free wi-fi and baked goods and coffee to purchase. They didn’t do it to get people in the pews on Sunday; the goal was to serve their neighbors.

“There’s no lack of need in our communities,” Groom said. “The big thing would be for people to be able to look at buildings in a critical, detached, and realistic way. How can this best help serve our missions? Do we need this building? How can we use it to serve God in the best time and place?”

Nancy Wind echoed the need for detachment. She explained that the key to Isaiah’s Table, a new ministry she coordinates in Syracuse, New York, is realizing that “space is to be used. Space is not to be kept.”

Wind is a lay leader in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who was part of a church that closed. The denominational body assumed the property but didn’t sell it right away. Wind and a few other leaders from the former congregation sold the contents of the congregation’s buildings and then began using the space to host a breakfast on Saturday to which they invited people from the community. People gathered together a few minutes before breakfast was served to sing the doxology. After they ate, they had a Bible study or discussion, where everyone listened to the wisdom of the group.

“It’s really rich to be a part of the faith-sharing and hearing ideas about God, especially since our community is made up of people who typically live on the margins of society,” said Wind. In the summers, Isaiah’s Table has a community garden and uses wagons to give out produce to neighbors.

Recently, the building was sold to a Baptist congregation, which allows Isaiah’s Table to continue its ministry alongside three immigrant gatherings. The five worshiping communities have a sense of sharing and mutual respect. They know that with flexibility and a bit of detachment, they can use the existing building to reach out to different people. And the church can remain a little bit weird.

*This article was corrected on April 18, 2014. In the original version, both Julia Groom's name and the city of Belen's were misspelled, and Groom's job title was misidentified.*