

5 do's and 5 don'ts for using your church building well

A physical space can be at the vital center of ministry—if you don't make it an idol.

by [Donna Schaper](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



Illustration by Adam Niklewicz

A church is both building and people, bricks and mortals. First came the attendance decline among mortals; a bricks crisis followed. Now church buildings are an endangered species. Drive through any American town and you might see a former church with weeds coming up out of the sidewalks, the door half hinged, the sign unpainted. There are 50 church buildings in Newburgh, New York, population 28,000; community organizers there estimate 2,000 people in worship on Sundays. One church in Rhode Island has a thousand pews, a famous collection of stained

glass and murals, and 14 members. David Greenhaw, president of Eden Seminary in St. Louis, reports that 80 percent of the church buildings within 500 miles of Eden were built before 1960. These buildings have enormous maintenance needs—and they were built for another time and another people.

The holy is not threatened by these changes. God will find a way to continue to touch people's lives. But between now and God's next revelation, a lot of people are going to be spiritually homeless.

The church I serve, Judson Memorial, is in Manhattan, where one church building after another has been converted into luxury housing or a high-priced restaurant. Judson is growing and thriving—in part because of the wide variety of ways our building is being used.

We took out the pews in 1969. According to congregational lore, there was less energy on Sunday mornings than on Saturday nights, when a postmodern dance group was experimenting in the meeting room. Why not give them more space? With the pews gone, we became a center for dance, theater, music, protest, and more. Our guests enhance our membership and Sunday morning participation. And we have become dependent on the income from these events, events we see as central to our ministry.

A space-use policy was devised a decade ago to manage our large building and obtain income for its care—while being able to continue offering free use of the building as well. Every quarter, the staff asks whether we are sticking to the policy: Are we giving away half the available time and space? Are we making money on the other half? More than a third of our million-dollar budget comes from building use. Of the many groups that don't pay, my favorite is Morning Gloryville, a Wednesday morning dance party without alcohol or drugs.

This two-point policy—maximize income for maintenance and maximize mission for ministry—is expensive. Half of our full-time staff is focused on managing the building and our tenants. Each week, 2,200 people come through our doors. Our congregation of 380 or so worships alongside three other congregations. The building's gym is now a theater available for rent. A dance company and school use the building on Monday nights; Tuesday nights the West Village Chorale rehearses. We also rent to movie companies and other market-rate groups as space is available. It rarely is.

Most places are not like Manhattan. Yet congregations in a wide variety of contexts have a common need: to recognize the church building problem and move into some kind of adaptive activity.

To that end, here are five dos and five don'ts, beginning with the don'ts.

1. *Don't keep denying the problem.* What you may imagine as unthinkable is in fact thinkable. When you move out of denial, an array of possibilities opens up for your land, your architecture, your memories, and your hopes. You have an asset along with your deficit, an open window along with the closing door.

2. *Don't rush to take the lowest offer.* Giving up too soon is almost as bad a strategy as giving up too late. Unscrupulous developers would love to hold your land long enough to get some profit out of it; local politicians often just want it back on the tax roll. Churches' notorious lack of business skills can make us sell too soon. If endowments are for rainy days and it is raining now, why not repurpose the building yourself or with a strong partner? It takes great discernment to know when it's time to give up and when you're not there yet.

3. *Don't set up a binary between the building and the people.* Remember the finger game about the church with the steeple and the people? The game is right. The spiritual and the material, the communal and the physical—it's all related. They are not enemies but friends. The binary says the building is profane and the people—and their worship and mission—are holy. But the building and the people alike are both profane and holy. Polishing the building without doing a ministry with it is silly. But the building, if it is not idolized, can be part of the mission. The two are one.

4. *Don't let the pastor off the hook.* The building committee shouldn't be the only ones in charge. Refuse to hire pastors who think they are incapable of fundraising or above it. Pastors are the ones who can lead you out. Make them preach about embodiment and incarnation. Get them to help you study the spiritual *why* long enough to become open to the imaginative *how*. Why bother to save church buildings? That is the most important question. Don't ignore it by futzing with the physical details.

5. *Don't go it alone.* There are probably five other congregations nearby that are going through the same thing. Don't think of them as your competition. Together, you might be able to hire and coordinate the resources you need to make smart,

future-oriented, demographically based decisions.

The dos follow from the don'ts. They emerge after you clear the deck of denial and its detailed obsessions. After denial—once we're free from the cobwebs of fear and the monkey mind of intersecting messes—we often find a way to think.

1. Remove the pews from your head, then your heart, and then your sanctuary. When the sanctuary is static, the energy of worship is often static as well. When the worship space can change, it can look full with 20 people in it or 200. A full set of chairs is spiritually uplifting to those leading worship as well as those participating in it. And the flexibility of chairs means you can use the room for different activities all week long. The possibilities are endless with chairs; they are highly limited with pews.

2. Imagine five congregations in your building. Muslims on Friday, Jews on Saturdays. On Sunday, legacy Christians at 11, Pentecostals at two, new immigrants at five. Why would one building not accommodate lots of different worshipers? The building was built for worship. If the specific kind of worship it was built for continues to fill people's hearts and fill the room, great. If it doesn't, why not be more inclusive? God won't be hurt. And many people will honor this approach to the divine. They will be less allergic to religion and its imperialism. They may even brag, "My church is open to all faiths."

3. Open the space to arts groups and other mission-consistent gatherings. Encourage group sings. Let dancers rehearse and perform. Bring in musicians of all kinds and invite them to also play in worship. Open your doors to a theater company. An empty space needs partners.

4. Go green—by using your building more. The more people use the space, the more efficient its maintenance and energy use are. People who work remotely during the week could use your Sunday school rooms—instead of coffee shops or coworking spaces—and help with the Internet bill. Sunday school parents may want to have a parents' night with child care at the church. Yoga classes can thrive in sacred space. Once your space is being used more and bringing in some income, it's easier to prioritize investing in things like energy conservation, solar power, or even accessibility.

5. Build partnerships. The evidence is overwhelming: churches need help raising capital. We need fundraising expertise. Most denominations have offices that attend

to building matters. Why not use them? Or work with other churches in your denomination or community to get the help you need. Those same politicians and developers who might want to use you can also help you. There is no reason to go it alone. There are multiple reasons to get together.

Even if you do the dos and don't do the don'ts, your church may not survive. That is not a crime. Things come and go; when they die, they make space for what's next. People, like buildings, will evolve and adapt. They will find a way to the divine—and the holy will find a habitation. It will be interesting to see where God decides to be housed.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Opening up God's house."