

Learning to love our church's (expensive) steeple

At first I resented the costly repairs. Then I took a closer look.

by [Rochelle A. Stackhouse](#) in the [December 5, 2018](#) issue



First Church of Christ (Center Church) in Hartford, Connecticut. Photo by Amit Gupta via Creative Commons License.

I arrived as transitional minister at a church in the midst of multiple projects put on hold when the previous pastor left, including a \$2 million construction project to repair a crumbling steeple and the capital campaign that went along with it. The main church building sits in the center of Hartford within sight of the state capitol, surrounded by skyscrapers with businesses and apartments, as well as homeless shelters and soup kitchens. In 1806, when the current building was erected, the steeple was the highest point in the city. Now it peeks out between larger buildings.

An expensive anachronism, I thought, the first time I saw it.

With one glorious five-year exception, my entire 36 years of ministry has been spent with churches in old buildings, though this one is the oldest. I keep telling God I am done with buildings. I am tired of the restrictions of pews, the endless repair projects, and, most of all, the tremendous amount of money spent on buildings, money which, I have always thought, could do more good elsewhere in ministry.

Still, I had been called to serve this congregation, which meant called to handle the construction project and support a capital campaign. Our church had been fortunate enough to receive a matching grant from Partners for Sacred Places, a national historic preservation organization. Very soon after my arrival, I spoke with our Partners representatives, who encouraged both me and the congregation to explore how these buildings might be an asset to us, to the city, and to God. Skeptical, but keeping an open mind despite the mounting bills, I made a pledge to the capital campaign and set out to summon some enthusiasm to do my job to support this costly and, to my mind, probably wasteful project.

Shortly after that, I had the opportunity to climb all the way to the top of the steeple with the construction supervisor and a church member. We climbed the steps inside the steeple as far as the nonfunctional clock, then outside on scaffolding up to the weather vane. I noticed what I first thought was vandalism: names and dates carved into the wood. Some of the dates, however, gave me pause: 1807, 1859, 1911, and on up to the late 20th century. The construction supervisor explained that he has seen this before in old buildings. Workers and sometimes members of property committees or church leaders carve their names into the wood in unseen places to mark the work accomplished. All the way up to the top we found these names, clearer where the paint was stripped off.

As I touched the carvings, I began to sense a great cloud of witnesses. Their names appeared nowhere else in our church records, nowhere in the written histories; they were not enshrined in Tiffany glass like the image of our founding pastor, Thomas Hooker. Some of their work survived in the intricate carvings too high for most people to see and yet important to the beauty of the steeple. I began to feel an odd affection for these craftspeople and artists and painters, an affection which began to seep through my curmudgeonly feelings about the waste and impracticality of old buildings. Was there something here after all that was worth our time and money?

On Sunday mornings, our church sets up a table out front with coffee, tea, and granola bars for anyone who passes by. Joe had met some of us at the winter “no-freeze” triage center in our nearby church house and happened to be at the bus stop outside our meetinghouse one Sunday. He came over for coffee and then asked if he could come into the church. We invited him, and everyone, for worship. Joe stayed for worship that day, and he told me afterward that he had not been anywhere so beautiful in a very long time. He didn’t feel welcome in beautiful places. He couldn’t afford concerts, and our choir sang so beautifully he felt like he had been at one. Joe became a worship regular and got to know some of our members well. He brought friends and encouraged others to come in from coffee to worship. Perhaps the building had a purpose I had not seen in our quest to serve those who needed help most in our city.

Sometimes those who need help the most may not be the most obvious candidates for that title. Our building sits in the midst of large office buildings and the buildings of a graduate school of a major university. On a social media site geared to downtown residents and workers, I saw a post inquiring about our clock and bell. Would they work again after our renovation? The clock and bell had not functioned for years. Yes, indeed, I replied. We anxiously awaited the day the new clock faces and bell workings would be installed.

Which set me to wondering again about the purpose of the steeple. In an age when so many people talk about mindfulness, the steeple and the bell have a role to play in calling people to pause and be mindful. Clocks and bells were built into steeples not just as a public service in the days before watches and cell phones. The Bible constantly puts time markers into significant stories: “In the year that King Uzziah died,” or “It was now about noon and darkness came over the land until three in the afternoon.” God enters our world, we are told, in the here and now, in specific times and places, not some amorphous hereafter. The clock and the bell remind us that God also enters into our here and now. The invitation comes to stop and listen, to look up and remember that there is something greater than us, longer than now, something beyond endless commerce and meetings, someone to whom, in an older understanding of the universe, that steeple points. In the same way as the call to prayer coming from a minaret five times a day invites Muslims to stop and get some perspective on their lives, so the bell in our steeple issues the same call to office workers, apartment dwellers, people waiting at the bus stop, and sanitation workers.

You might say I've had a small conversion experience. We definitely have some work to do as a congregation on making the best possible use of our buildings. I still feel restricted by those pews. At some point I believe we will remove some of them to better accommodate our postworship hospitality time and to allow for more creative use of our chancel area. Which costs money. As I look up to the ceiling of the sanctuary on Sunday, the peeling paint reminds me that another million dollars could be spent tomorrow, and a million more after that. I see the same need for resources when I go to our Sunday dinners frequented by our homeless neighbors, or talk to the man who occasionally sleeps on our church house porch. In my spirit's eye, there is no equivalence in the need: I still would place people over paint. As a congregation we discuss and discern how to balance care for our community and care for this historic building so that it lives on as a true sanctuary, not as a museum.

In the midst of the continuing theological, practical, and relational struggle, however, I am learning daily to see this old house as more of an asset than a liability. The scaffolding has now come down. Beginning with our golden weather vane, the renewed steeple glows, day and night. The clock and the bell have been working for several weeks, a source of great joy to the congregation and people I have spoken with on the streets. The construction crew carved their names and dates into the wood. People from all stations in life wander into our sanctuary and smile with awe and wonder at the beauty of the windows. Local photographers have sent photos of our illuminated steeple at night; I catch my breath at its beauty. I climbed up to the top twice more before the scaffolding came down, looking in prayer down to the capitol and around at the offices and stores, bus stops and shelters, apartments, and classrooms in our neighborhood. I hope that, in these uncertain times, our steeple might once again be a beacon and reminder that light shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome. It is now for me.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What's a steeple for?"