

It's time to reimagine the church parking lot

What if it functioned more like a bridge than a wall?

by [G. Travis Norvell](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue



(Photo by Anita Denunzio on Unsplash)

In 1988, Walt Pulliam concluded his 13-year pastorate at Judson Memorial Baptist Church in Minneapolis and retired. In his last sermon, he told the congregation that the essence of their future hung on one word: *parking*. If only Judson could acquire space for parking, then folks could drive in from miles around and the church's future would be secured.

Pulliam had every reason to believe in the promise of parking. During his tenure at Judson, he watched two nearby congregations, Bethlehem Lutheran (two blocks west) and Mount Olivet Lutheran (a mile southwest) grow by leaps and bounds. Judson, Bethlehem, and Mount Olivet all had a lot in common. They were city neighborhood churches with talented pastors, beautiful buildings, gifted musicians, engaged leadership, and visions for ministry.

But parking was one thing the Lutheran congregations had that Judson did not. Judson's footprint remained the same, and its membership contracted. But Mount Olivet and Bethlehem's membership grew when their footprints did—especially when they bought the lots around them and turned them into parking spaces (89 for Bethlehem, 332 for Mount Olivet—yes, I counted).

Today these Lutheran congregations have at least five services each Sunday and multiple campuses in the area; they own and operate year-round camps, nursing homes, and counseling centers and offer a plethora of excellent ministries and services. From the outside it appears that God blessed Mount Olivet and Bethlehem Lutheran and let Judson Church wither.

I'm now the pastor at Judson. When I arrived, I proposed that the church needed to become more connected to our surrounding community. But I felt the presence of fear—both in the hearts of church members and in my own. I kept hearing three reasons why venturing out into the community would fail: we did not have enough parking for visitors and new members, we did not have the resources to attract and keep new members, and there was not enough time to turn the church around so that we could attract and keep new members.

I believed, however, that if you can transform your vision of parking, then space and time are a piece of cake.

Churches survived, succeeded, and even flourished 1,900 years before parking lots ever existed. Even most city neighborhood churches never had parking spaces when they began. The need for church parking lots emerged only after most of the members moved to the suburbs, away from the city neighborhood church, and drove in for Sunday worship services. Before they drove and parked, most church members walked, biked, or took public transit to church.

A parking lot is a flat, impervious surface with a single, temporary purpose.

Contemplate a parking lot for a moment. It's a flat, impervious surface with a single purpose: the temporary storage of automobiles. These spaces for cars are designed only for those who can drive, excluding children, a good number of seniors, and many people with disabilities.

And a church parking lot is more than this. I invite you to stand in a church parking lot or imagine doing so. Notice your distance from neighboring houses, local

businesses, or passersby. You are standing on a horizontal wall, an asphalt expanse that separates your faith community from its neighbors and community.

Try taking a sheet of paper and re-creating the houses, businesses, or parks that used to be where your church parking lot is now. How much did it displace? Or form a human chain in the parking lot on a Sunday after worship. Start from the door everyone uses to enter the church from the parking lot and go to the main street. How many people does it take to cross this distance? The addition of a church parking lot typically creates a new environment: a de-neighborhood church with members who drive in from other neighborhoods and have little or no connection to the neighborhood the church inhabits.

It doesn't have to be this way. What if a church parking lot functioned more like a bridge than a wall? What if it functioned like a plaza where the faith community re-neighbors itself to its once familiar home?

In 2019, people in San Francisco realized it was cheaper to pay for public parking spots than to rent office space. As an experiment, workers fed parking meters with coins, set up tables and chairs, and created outdoor workspaces. They connected with others throughout the city via Twitter, using the hashtag #WePark. The movement quickly spread to other cities. Those participating were challenging both the high cost of office rental space and the amount of space we devote to automobiles rather than people. As the experiment grew, participants also discovered how isolated and alone they had felt and how much they missed working in a community.

The third Friday of September is International PARK(ing) Day, deemed so by Rebar Art and Design Studio. On this day the San Francisco-based interdisciplinary group encourages people from around the globe to transform public parking spaces into uses other than the temporary storage of automobiles. "From public parks to free health clinics, from art galleries to demonstration gardens," Rebar writes in *The PARK(ing) Day Manual*, "PARK(ing) Day participants have claimed the metered parking space as a rich new territory for creative experimentation and activism."

This could serve as inspiration for churches. Imagine a parklet with a few chairs and tables for neighbors to congregate and have coffee. Or a seasonal outdoor parklet-chapel—an intimate holy place to rest, pray, and meditate, like a way station along an ancient pilgrimage route. When I offered this idea to a local architect, his eyes

got big as he quickly scribbled on a napkin a mini Gothic cathedral with colorful plexiglass windows to replicate stained glass.

Or imagine a straw bale garden. Joel Karsten of Roseville, Minnesota, wanted to start a vegetable garden at his new home, but his soil was poor and thin. He didn't have the money to build raised beds, but he did have a memory of healthy and vigorous thistles growing out of straw bales from his time growing up on a dairy farm in southwestern Minnesota. He started experimenting with growing vegetables in straw bales. It took years, but he perfected the art of straw bale gardening.

The amazing thing about straw bale gardening is that you do not need any soil, just five to eight hours of sun every day. In one parking space, you can fit 20 straw bales directly on top of the asphalt. These 20 straw bales can yield enough produce to feed a family of four throughout the summer and fall. Imagine the symbolism of a church giving up two parking spaces to grow vegetables and then giving the food away. Or inviting people from the neighborhood to establish a community garden in some of its parking spaces.

Church parking lots can be sites for food, prayer, fun, exercise, and even housing.

In a similar vein, city neighborhood churches around North America are giving away their parking spaces on Saturday mornings to local farmers markets. For a few hours, a lifeless expanse of asphalt becomes a joyous, boisterous community. Other churches have painted a labyrinth on their lot, blocked the entrances on weeknights, and invited the community for an evening of contemplation. Others have blocked off their parking lot for extended periods of time so that neighborhood kids have a safe place to play.

Michele Molstead, former outreach director at Nice Ride Minnesota, a bike share company in the Twin Cities, suggested a new kind of VBS: vacation bike school, where city neighborhood church parking lots are used to teach local residents about bike riding, bike safety, and bike repair. During COVID, church parking lots have been repurposed into community dinner sites, outdoor theaters and concert stages, COVID-19 testing sites, ballot drop-off sites, trick or treat venues, and more.

Church parking lots can be more than sites for food, prayer, fun, and exercise; they can also be sites for housing. Churches in the San Francisco Bay Area have invited people who live in their cars to park in their parking lots for the night. These churches provide safety, along with kitchen, bathroom, and laundry access and a

sense of community. ([See “Room in the parking lot,” Jan. 15, 2020.](#))

Some churches are going further, seeking to transform parking spaces into lots for tiny homes. In many places, churches are exempt from some zoning laws—making their parking lots viable tiny home locations in urban environments that might not have many. Some tiny homes function as transitional housing, others as permanent residences. In the south Minneapolis neighborhood where George Floyd was murdered, Calvary Lutheran Church transformed its church parking lot into a community center offering food, clothing, medical supplies, and water. As the days of street protests turned into weeks, the Calvary parking lot hosted voter registration drives and functioned as a staging area for protesters and marches.

In north Minneapolis, Don and Sondra Samuels felt a desire to do something with the rage, pain, and lament their community was experiencing after Floyd’s death. Their vision was for a pop-up prayer tent in the community; they chose an abandoned parking lot at West Broadway and Bryant Avenue. The lot became a spiritual healing center. The tent was not a little canopy but a grand structure with the look of a tent revival. And it was a revival: a moral revival, an antiracism revival, a revival led by Black preachers and artists to show the way for the White community.

Instead of preaching, there was often silent prayer. Instead of pews, there were pillows and chairs. Instead of a “come to Jesus” moment, there was a “come to your senses” moment, a call for transformation. Instead of music used to manipulate your emotions, there was a singing bowl. Instead of the “four steps to salvation,” there was an invitation to repair the brokenness. Instead of stained glass, there were creations by local artists being completed before your eyes. I imagine it was what a revival would have looked like if Howard Thurman ever planned one. The parking lot became a holy, transformative, and promising space.

This kind of creative and holy imagination about parking lots can be fragile. In the late 1980s, someone—no one, to this day, seems to know who—in the outskirts of St. Albans, West Virginia, my hometown, installed nine-foot basketball rims in the parking lot of a Methodist church. Within days word had spread throughout the town. From after school until dusk and on early weekend mornings, kids—up to 100 of us at a time—waited patiently to play on this court and for their chance to dunk a basketball. The Methodist church was sitting on an outreach gold mine.

After a few weeks of our daily presence, the church, rather than welcome us as the strangers in their midst, began to run us off. Then one mournful day, someone from the church came with a blowtorch and cut the basketball poles down to the ground. In the church's mind, the parking lot was reserved for the once-a-week appearance of cars whose drivers were not from the neighborhood; it was not a plaza to be shared and enjoyed by young neighbors.

But this is a mindset that can be overcome. Throughout the years Judson Church has tried to acquire land around it to create a parking lot. In the 1990s, the church was finally able to purchase a house next to the church. It planned to demolish the house and create a parking lot.

But after the purchase, Judson learned from an architect that it could carve out at most just six parking spaces. For the church to obtain enough off-street parking to accommodate a healthy Sunday attendance, it would have to acquire, tear down, and pave over eight houses on Harriet Avenue. This would have radically transformed the neighborhood, just so that the church could satisfy its need for the temporary storage of cars for a few hours one day a week. Judson abandoned its dream of acquiring off-street parking.

But there are other ways to imagine transportation to the church. In 2012 the Australian organization Cycling Promotion Fund made a public demonstration to show the greater efficiency of walking, biking, and taking public transit to get from point A to point B. In the space taken up by 60 cars, roads can accommodate 16 buses or 600 bicycles or almost 1,000 pedestrians.

At Judson, we began to focus our efforts on those who can walk, bike, or take public transit, rather than only on those who drive. When we did this, we saw that we did not need a parking lot. In fact, we had all the parking we needed. Judson has 13 on-street parking spots. Inside just one of them, ten bikes can be parked. Judson also has eight spots of boulevard bike parking, which could easily expand to 40 or 50 more with permanent racks. Or we could use temporary bike racks on Sunday mornings, like the ones used for triathlons or other cycling events. We have a plethora of parking, and we didn't even realize it.

Of course, not everyone will be able to walk, bike, or take public transit. Some cannot bike, some live too far away, others have physical limitations. Too many times, however, churches have prioritized able-bodied drivers over the rest of the

congregation.

What if a group of able-bodied drivers in a congregation agreed not to drive alone on Sundays, not to park near the front of the church, and not to drive at all when that's an option? Imagine the impact of their solidarity with the people in the congregation who *can't* drive. This small act can create small connections of empathy and compassion, making the heart a little more tender. Jesus proclaimed the most vulnerable to be blessed, and one way the church can proclaim this same blessing is with a different approach to transit and parking. Even if only five parking spaces are freed up by such a commitment, that is five spaces that were not previously available for the elderly or those with physical challenges to be more a part of the faith community they love. As more people walk, bike, or take public transit, more parking spots will be available, enabling the faith community to see the abundance of parking and become more creative about the available spots.

Unfortunately, many cities lack frequent public transit service on Sunday mornings. Churches, however, have options there as well. They can move their worship and gathering time to another day when public transit is more reliable. Our common experience of COVID-19 has revealed a variety of worship times and possibilities as individuals and families choose when and how they worship. Or neighboring churches along public transit routes could work together to lobby their local transit authorities to increase Sunday service. Alternately, faith communities could band together to revive the model of the church van as a public transit alternative. They could offer staggered start times, similar to many urban school schedules, to make sharing a van even easier. Or they could use Google Maps to plan efficient carpooling scenarios.

When Walt Pulliam emphasized parking as the key to Judson Church's future, he was spot-on. He knew, like all of us know, that when a church has a committee or business meeting, there are really two meetings: the one that takes place in the designated meeting room and the one afterward in the parking lot or on the sidewalk. Maybe our churches are telling us something about where our energy and efforts should be placed.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Reimagining the church parking lot." The article is adapted from Norvell's new book, Church on the Move: A Practical Guide for Ministry in the Community (Judson Press).