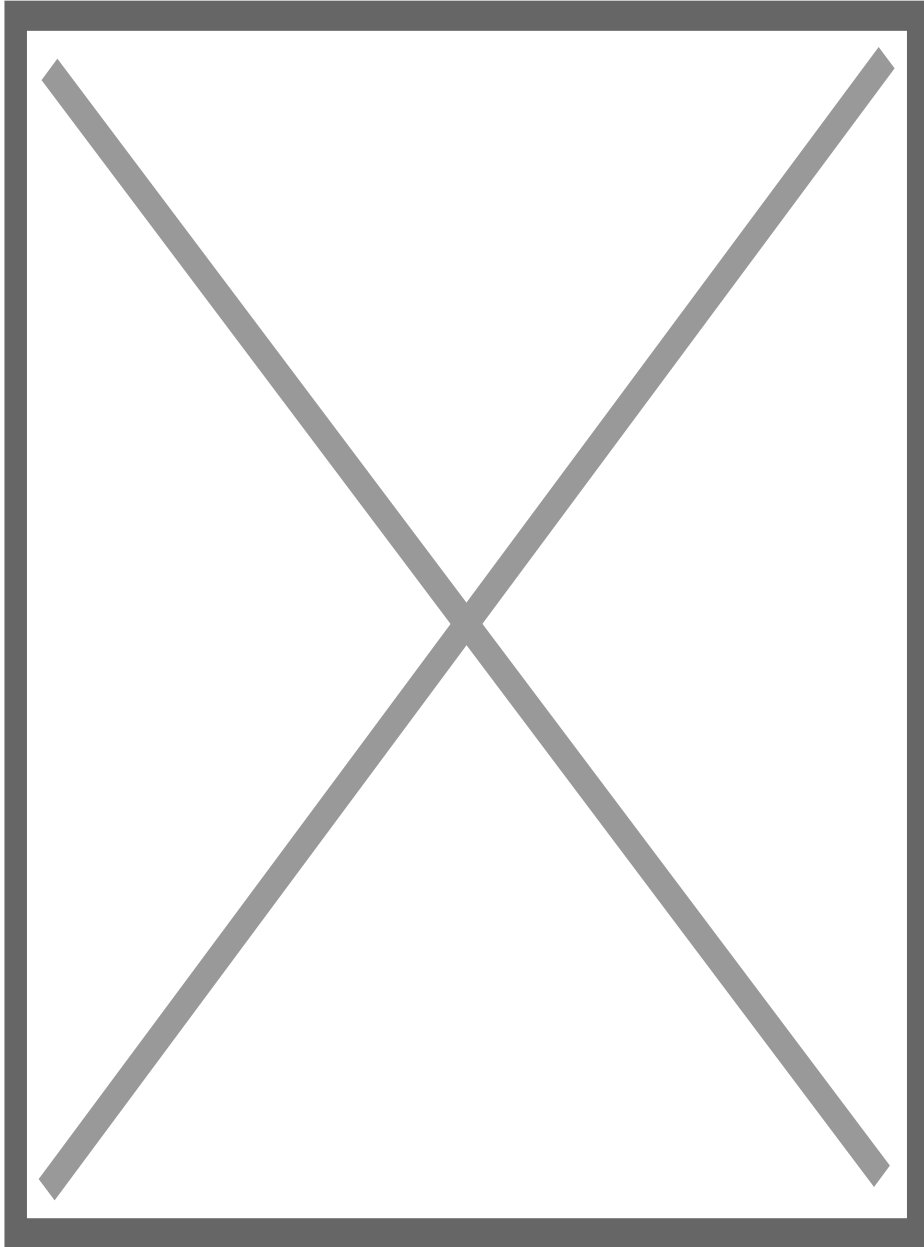


It's not about the building

A pastor's call is to follow Jesus beyond budgets, roofs, and steeples.

by [Dawn Martin Hyde](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration (Dear pastor icon by Nicholas Blechman)

We asked experienced pastors and seminary professors to put themselves in the apostle Paul's shoes: You're writing a letter to a present-day ministry leader. What issues do you want to address,

and what theology can you bring to bear on them?

Dear Pastor,

I know better than to ask how you are doing. The question feels tired.

The conversation that followed would wear us both out and leave us more confused and worried about the state of our beloved church.

Instead, let me begin with gratitude for the work you are doing. I am grateful to God that you are bearing witness to our Savior Jesus Christ through your work. You are showing up in the community to which you were called. You are hearing the heartache as a relationship falls apart. You are planning funerals for loved ones and for strangers. You are breaking bread with those diagnosed with a disease. You are physically there with God's people, bearing witness to their pain and showing with your presence that God does not leave us alone in our suffering; God comes close to us in our suffering. God gives us hope that does not disappoint us.

You, dear preacher, are living the gospel truth by showing up in suffering and not walking away. And if you *have* walked away from the ministry, for a few minutes or for an entire season of your life, that's OK. Our Savior understands. The weight of a crisis bears heavy upon us. I need you to know that you are not alone. Christ willingly endured suffering, faced rejection and death so that we would know that we are not alone.

There are also thousands of us across the nation who are living alongside you in this spiritual tension about the state of our church. We are acutely aware of the crisis. We see the signs of death. And we sense the impending pain as churches close. The weight of that reality weighs heavy on the chest. Sometimes it keeps us from sleeping.

It is imperative that we name what is dying. Being honest about it can set us free. We do not do ourselves any favors by sidestepping the truth. The institution of the church is dying. The denominations we take pride in are dying. The building in which you serve is probably dying. Has that roof let you down? Has it rained in your office yet? Are you facing major renovations and worried about how you will cover the cost with fewer people contributing?

I think one of the greatest challenges of our time is that we are strapped with costly buildings. More and more, the commitment to maintain those buildings seems to take priority, and I get why. Buildings keep us safe from the elements. They help us gather people together in one place. They allow an asset to be shared among many, both the joy of the space and the burden of it. Our ancestors were wise to build buildings and to pass them down to us.

However, the question must be asked: Has caring for church buildings taken priority over following Jesus? As leaders of an institution, are we allowing ourselves enough time to follow the footsteps of Jesus? Are we telling people about him? Are we investing time in the stranger by our well? Or are we too busy with the business of tending to the church building that we no longer attend to the spiritual work of following Jesus?

The wear and tear on old buildings tugs like the wear and tear of an aged body. We can't fight in the same ways we used to fight. We must find grace. And we must not fall into the spiritual trap of despair when the institution is not what it was once promised for us. It's OK for a building to die. It's OK for an institution to die. The gospel lives.

I don't want to dismiss the pain for those of us whose career is tied to this institution. In most places, the creature comforts of being a pastor are diminishing. So don't put your hope in the institution or the building. Put your hope in Jesus, who is God incarnate.

The gospel is captured in architecture and stained glass, no doubt. People have been building temples and drawing their eyes up toward God for centuries. Space is sacred, and space can tell the story of Jesus. But remember that when buildings aren't available, the gospel lives in you.

Use your voice to preach the gospel. Encourage your congregation to read the scriptures and pass them along to their children. People are still talking about the man who was killed on a tree by the people who loved him. Empires have tried to kill Jesus' story without success. Don't worry, we do not have the power to stop that story, but we do have a call to attend to it. We are called to tell people about Jesus. The gospel lives in you every time you preach, teach, and administer the sacraments. The gospel lives in you as you upload worship podcasts and videos teaching the way of Jesus. The gospel lives in how you spend your time, with people and with the Bible.

Recently I spoke with a fellow pastor who feels trapped in an old church facility. His days are filled with worry about the next thing that will break, the money required to fix it, and the dwindling number of people committed to bear the financial stress of the institution's property with him.

God has given him a vision to sell the property, to break free of that institutional burden. He points out that in the Bible, Jesus doesn't spend most of his time inside a temple teaching. There are no records of Jesus being consulted about how to pay the sanctuary light bill. Jesus is outside—meeting people where they were, hearing their stories and jokes and fears. Jesus is with the people.

This is our cue to follow. If fewer people are coming inside our buildings, then let us not wring our hands wondering how to entice them inside. Instead let's go out to meet them where they are. Jesus doesn't meet the Samaritan woman at the temple at Bible study or over coffee hour after worship. He meets her at the watering hole. He isn't supposed to talk to her, but he does anyway. In their meeting, she receives an invitation to faith and an invitation to community. Jesus opens the kingdom to her.

The call is the same today. Schedule your next meeting at the local watering hole—at a coffee shop or pub. Take a Sunday to visit the nearest soccer tournament to cheer teenagers on as they do what they love. Talk with their parents. Remember that the conversations you have about Jesus in public may mean as much to those who overhear as they do to those to whom you speak.

And as you consider what frustrates you, what causes you to grind your teeth at night, consider how you might let go of some institutional stress in order to move closer to Jesus. Jesus doesn't say to his disciples, "Stay in this office; attend to the building and budget." He says, "Come, follow me." And where does Jesus lead them? To God's people in their natural habitats: in homes, in schools, in park plazas, at the market, at work.

Buildings serve a purpose. They are assets. They are things we can move and touch and depend on. They are physical ways we mark meaning. A wall is so much more than a wall once it bears the pencil marks of a kid growing up over time. A space becomes a home when you add rugs and chairs and tables and people and food and trash and brooms. The physical space exists to serve the people, not the other way around. It's our job as pastors to keep that in check.

I know you need your building. I know you have church members who are attached to certain parts of the property. I know that the brick and mortar matter. But when you follow Jesus in and out of the temple in your telling of his story, it's your responsibility to let God's people know that their identity in Christ exists outside the church building, too.

There are people outside the church who are interested in maintaining neither a church building nor an institution that you helped build. But they may be interested in Jesus: in knowing him, in hearing what he does for people. They may want to hear the stories of how he heals and forgives and challenges and invites us into community. And they may want to follow.

This is our primary role: Tell them about Jesus. Surround yourself with those who will tell you about Jesus, too. You need to hear it.

You are equipped already for this call. You have everything you need. You may be required to let go of your attachment to your particular flavor of denomination and your particular steeple and stained-glass window. Those were never the selling points of this mission anyway. Following Jesus is what's compelling.

Tell them about Jesus.