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# Building for the Future: Sacred Space Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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# BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE:

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DMin Dissertation

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# ABSTRACT

United Methodist churches in the United States must address the problems of ineffectiveness and insolvency caused by decreasing human and financial resources combined with increasing costs of owning and maintaining real estate. My work addresses these problems by first exploring the history of sacred space in the Christian context. Then, by assessing the development of sacred space into church-owned property, and then considering the proliferation of church-owned real estate, especially by the United Methodist Church in the United States. Finally, I will put forward alternative to current church property use trends based on innovative examples from around the United States.

The problems described above are being alleviated in creative ways by a growing number of churches. They are simultaneously becoming more engaged in their communities and better poised for future ministry in a fast-changing cultural landscape. Solutions include new and different ways to utilize land and buildings, such as sharing, repurposing, and rebuilding. Churches that address the problem with creativity that is theologically grounded, community minded, and ministry focused will acquire, develop, operate, and maintain their property in such a way that the land and buildings will not diminish ministry, but rather facilitate and fund ministry for generations to come.

My work culminates in a weekend conference that includes presentations by pastors and church leaders who are implementing creative solutions now and an opportunity for participants to exercise their creative, problem-solving muscles on the host church as a real-time case study. The outcome of my work will be a greater willingness and ability for church leaders and pastors to take steps now to stem the tide of

churches dying and closing by turning their property from ministry and resource drains into ministry and resource generators.

# SECTION ONE: CHURCH BUILDING CRISIS

## Introduction

Place is sacred. The history of Christianity is in many ways delineated by the places where people have experienced the presence of God. Places are important for Christians because God incarnate means that God meets us in the particularities of time and space. Christian history is also replete with examples of people erecting an edifice to mark a place as sacred, either because of an experience with God or in anticipation of an experience with God. This practice has held true throughout history, though the construction has taken many different forms. In the United States today every town, large or small, contains at least one church building. The proliferation of these places and the perception of their purpose is precisely the point of this paper. When the sacred places and structures become too important and are valued more for themselves rather than as a divine place for meeting and ministry, they become idols.

Attempting to address the state of all sacred places of all faiths around the world is beyond the scope of this paper. In order to provide adequate engagement with the topic, the focus here is narrowed to the stewardship of land and buildings as sacred places in the modern Christian Church in North America. Even given this narrowing, there still exists a wide breadth of factors and influences that shape how and why churches build buildings and then what is done with those buildings. What is common to them all, though, is that the property a local church buys and the facilities it builds has a defining impact on its purpose, identity, and efficacy.

## Your Church

Does this sound like your church? Or a church that you know? It is a First United Methodist Church, over one hundred and fifty years old, and located in the urban/suburban area of a major U.S. city. The membership size of the church peaked around twenty years ago and has been stagnant or in slight decline ever since, along with the financial giving. The community around the church has transitioned during that same time from a predominantly white, blue collar demographic to a racially and culturally diverse community of young professionals and families. The congregation still looks much like the community used to and is aging and shrinking, along with its resources for ministry.

The church has a largely untapped resource: its property. It sits on a large piece of property that is beautiful and has a mix of lawn, field and wooded areas. It has playgrounds, a modest outdoor amphitheater, and recreation space. The buildings include a sanctuary, fellowship hall, gym, kitchen, and several classrooms of varying sizes. The church is not in a financial crisis per se, and even recently paid off the remaining debt on a six million dollar, multi-year renovation and expansion of the facilities. Increased maintenance and repair costs related to the new facilities have already begun to appear in the church budget that continues to grow in spite of stagnant or declining giving.

The leadership of the example church has decided to address their concerns about space use and expense by adopting policies and strategies to make space available to the community in new ways such as hosting community groups, civic functions, and recreational activities. Their reasons are two-fold. One reason is to open the church in creative ways to people in the area who might not otherwise be inclined to make a first

visit to campus for a worship service or other religious activity. The second reason is to offset the cost of maintenance and upkeep on the property by having it pay for itself via revenue generated by its use. The church leadership believes the needs are apparent in their community and they have the space to help meet them. Additionally, the church has recently been approached separately by both a commercial real estate developer and a denominationally-affiliated non-profit who are both interested in partnering with the church to develop a revenue-generating use on the land.

The scenario described above in this real-life example is becoming more common. The example church finds itself in a position of growing costs and shrinking membership and budget, which will begin to force difficult conversations about cuts to ministry funding. It also has an underutilized asset in its land and buildings, that may hold a solution to the problem. This work will attempt to explore and explain innovative solutions to the problem described above. The first step in doing so will be to clearly identify the problem. Then consideration will be given to the history of the problem and how churches got to this point. The primary focus of this work will be to examine examples of how churches today are addressing the problem and to offer the reader a framework to do the same kind of creative problem solving in their own context.

## Crisis Point

American Christianity is facing a serious problem as congregations ’average age increases and average size decreases while their buildings are requiring greater and greater investment of resources to build and maintain. This trend is forcing churches to close at an alarming and growing rate. As Jonathan Merritt points out, recent history has

seen 6,000 to 10,000 churches closing in the United States every year.[1] The COVID-19 pandemic has potentially escalated that trend, especially in the United States, as will be addressed later. Even growing churches are becoming more heavily invested in their property, exposing them to a similar eventuality. For example, the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas is the largest-membership church in the United States. They recently completed construction of a $100 million sanctuary and supporting facilities. The size and expense of maintaining this kind of facility will be a significant factor influencing future decisions by this church.

Looking at the modern landscape of church growth in the United States requires a recognition of the proliferation of buildings. The old adage that there is a church on every street corner in America exists for a reason. According to research cited by John Corrigan and Winthrop Hudson in the ninth edition of their book, *Religion in America*, in just the short period of time between 1945 and 1960, spending on church building construction in the United States grew at a remarkable rate, from $26 million to just over $1 billion.[2]

Corrigan and Hudson note that the spending did not indicate merely an increase in the number of buildings being built, but also in their magnitude and grandeur. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. said he invested substantially in the construction of a new building for his church because "he did not want the business community to look down on the churches."[3] This same sentiment is addressed by Joseph Stiles in his book advising churches about property development when he writes that "churches should be the most inspiring and

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[1] Jonathan Merritt, "America's Epidemic of Empty Churches," The Atlantic, November 25, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/what-should-america-do-its-empty-church-buildings/576592/.

[2] John Corrigan and Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America* (NY: Routledge, 2018), 507.

[3] Ibid., 452.

most advantageously located buildings in a community."[4] As a result, many mainline churches now own and occupy large, ornate buildings on some of the most valuable property in town. The property a local church buys and the facilities it builds not only establishes presence, but it also has a defining effect on its purpose and identity. Given the overall trends of decline and churches ' propensity to build, now is the time to act and for churches to give fresh thought to how they invest in and steward their land and buildings so as to enhance, rather than hinder, ministry.

## History

In order to arrive at a fruitful course of action, it will be helpful to consider the role that sacred places have historically played for churches. The history of sacred Christian spaces will be given consideration in biblical and post-biblical terms. This somewhat brief examination will lead to an assessment of the modern treatment of church land and buildings and how churches are addressing the crisis. Lastly then, we can identify any emerging trends and frame the factors that will be formative for decisions about the future of church facilities.

## Biblical History

Consider some examples of the places described in the Bible that people called sacred for God. Many sacred places mentioned in the Bible were given special names to signify the meaning they held as a place designated for the worship of God. Similarly, they were intended to be remembered and revisited as the location of an encounter that

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[4] Joseph Stiles, *Acquiring and Developing Church Real Estate* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 28.

someone or some group had with God. In Genesis 32, after Jacob wrestled with an angel of God and survived and was renamed Israel, verse 30 tells us that Jacob named that place Peniel/Penuel because he had come face-to-face with God and survived.

*Altars*

These places of encounter and worship of God were often marked with some sort of structure like an earthen or stone altar. Early biblical passages describe earth or stone outcroppings being designated as altars or altars being built by stacking stones or rocks as a way to designate a meaningful place. The altars were basic and functional and absent of ornamentation. These rudimentary structures were built using nearby stones and their purpose was to be a place to offer a sacrifice to God or to mark the place where someone had an encounter with God.

After God delivered Noah and his family along with the animals and birds during the flood, Noah is recorded in Genesis 8 as responding to God's deliverance by building an altar. He took some of the clean animals and birds and offered them as burnt offerings to God on the altar. His offering on the altar was an act of worship acknowledging how God had saved them. Noah's offering pleased God and God declared that never again would God flood the whole earth. The altar of earth or stone was the sacred place where Noah honored and worshipped God.

In one of the most gut-wrenching tales in the Old Testament, Abraham is called by God in Genesis 22 to offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord. The scripture says that Isaac had even been tasked by his father to carry up the mountain the knife that would be used to sacrifice him and the wood that would be used to burn the

sacrifice. Abraham is stopped from putting his son to death on a sacrificial altar of his own making, just as he was raising the knife. Verse 14 says that Abraham then named that place Jehovahjirah, which means "the Lord sees," or "the Lord is seen" and "on the mountain of God it will be provided". From that point forward, the place where God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac was known as a place where Abraham saw God, was seen by God, and where God provided.

In Joshua 4, once Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan River, he had twelve men bring stones out from the middle of the river with them and they stacked the stones on dry ground once they had crossed. In verses 21-23, Joshua tells the Israelites that the stacked stones are to be a reminder for them of how they had crossed over the Jordan on dry ground. The altar of stones would not only be a reminder for them, it would be a reminder for future generations who would see it so that all the people of the earth would come to know of how God delivered Israel into the promised land. The altar built at the crossing of the Jordan River became a sacred place intended to span generations as an indication of God's deliverance.

*Tabernacle*

When the numerous descendants of Israel were delivered from Egypt and they embarked together on their journey through the desert to the Promised Land, they were instructed by God in Exodus 25:8 to construct a portable tabernacle, or tent, that would be a sanctuary for God so that God could be present among them. They did as the Lord instructed, and this sacred space known as the tabernacle or the tent of meeting became

central to the faith of the Israelites. It was the place where they made their sacrifices to God as an act of worship and it was also God's dwelling place in their midst. The tent was understood as God's home among God's people. The most clear evidence that the tent was sacred space was the fact that the inner chamber of the tent was designated as the resting place for the ark of the covenant, God's throne.

With its large and elaborate and divinely inspired construction instructions, its fine furnishings and decor, and its inner room reserved for the ark, the tent was much more substantial than the piles of rocks that previously served as sacred places. Not only was the tent more impressive, it was singular. The tabernacle was the one location where the people could focus their attention and their faith and know that God was there with them. The tent serves as a movable sacred place until God's people can arrive at their promised home and construct a more permanent temple. Because they are on the move toward the Promised Land and God is on the move with them, the structure they built for God goes on the move with them.

*Temple*

Once the Hebrew people reached the Promised Land and established for themselves a permanent home, under the direction of King Solomon, they constructed a permanent home for God in their midst, the First Temple. The Solomonic Temple was a massive and impressive building made of sturdy construction materials and adorned with the finest ornamentation. It was a physical representation of the fulfilment of the covenant God made with Israel to give them a land of their own and establish them as a nation. The completion of the construction of this building signified for Israel both their

permanence as a nation and God's permanent presence with them. In many ways, the building itself embodied the success of the Hebrew people, both in its opulence and its constancy.

While the people of Israel had other minor temples with religious functions, the Temple, whether in its first or second form, remained the single most central place to the faith of the Jewish people throughout biblical history. It was their primary permanently constructed sacred place. In their work on the history of Israel, J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes observe that the temple, based on its dimensions and contents, "was not intended for use by the general public but as a 'house' for Yahweh and a royal chapel for the king and senior priests".[5] They also note that the courtyard outside the temple with its altar of sacrifice and laver, would have been the primary location of the general worship and religious activity of the people.[6] Furthermore, the temple also served as the physical, yet now permanent, representation of the presence of God because the temple construction included, like the tabernacle before it, an inner room that housed the ark of the covenant, which was God's throne seat.

While the permanence and majesty of such sacred construction was encouraging and empowering for the people of Israel, likewise, its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians the first time and the Romans the second time was devastating to their communal faith. If the presence of the temple indicated God's presence and protection for Israel, then the demolition of the temple indicated God's absence or judgment. Old

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[5] J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 202.

[6] Ibid., 203.

Testament prophets Micah (3:12) and Jeremiah (26:6) predicted the destruction of the Temple because of Israel's unfaithfulness to God and Ezra (5:12) echoed the sentiment as Israel prepared to rebuild it. The Israelites despondent during the diaspora were comforted by the prophet Isaiah (40:1-2) that there was hope for them even though the temple had been destroyed. With a physical place being so central to their faith, the Israelites saw the Temple and the religious activity therein, as the tangible representation that they were with God and that God was with them.

Of additional interest to Christians regarding the Temple are Jesus 'prophetic words about the Temple being torn down and rebuilt (Mark 15:3), which were shortly followed in Mark 15:38 by the veil covering the entrance to God's throne room in the Temple being torn in half upon Jesus 'death on the cross. The writer of Hebrews (10:19-21) interprets these events as expanding access to the throne of God from solely the high priest to all believers. Matthew French asserts that, based upon these events, the rending of the temple veil in two eliminates the need for a sacred place for the presence of God:

> The veil of the temple can be interpreted as an Old Testament symbol for the metaphysical barrier that sin creates between God and humanity, which prohibits individuals from coming into God's presence. With Christ's sacrifice, this barrier was torn, and people can now experience God through Jesus. The temple is no longer one's only access to God. Thus, the passage serves as a rebuttal to the argument that a sacred space is necessary for the recognition of God's presence.[7]

French's observations notwithstanding, the period of biblical history is largely characterized by a faith dependent upon sacred places, culminating in the establishment

[7] Matthew French, "The Debate on the Necessity of Church Buildings Through the Lens of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," *Methodist University Monarch Review*, Vol. 4 (2017): 27.

of the Temple as the embodiment of God's presence among the people. The biblical evidence demonstrates that the places were sacred in terms of both geography and theology. Biblical characters like Noah, Abraham, and Joshua identified specific ground where they experienced the presence of God and they called those places sacred. The place had special meaning because God had made God's self known to them in that spot. Additionally, sacred places in the bible were evidence of God's presence among the people, like the tabernacle and the Temple. These places were holy, whether mobile like the tabernacle or permanent like the Temple, because the building was a sign that God was with them. Finally, the holy sites also served as the place where the people would gather to offer their sacrifices in worship of God. The argument could be made that the Israelites would not have had their faith without the places they called holy.

## Post Biblical History

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans, and the accompanying diaspora, Jewish faith life moved from building-or-place-centered to being centered around the teachings and teachers of their faith. Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist explain in their book on Christian history that "Jews in the diaspora were already moving away from the sacrifice in the Temple being a significant part of their religious life . . . they increasingly looked to the oral traditions of the rabbis and to the presence of Torah in their midst as their guides for renewing Judaism on the other side of crisis."[8] When the Jewish people of the first-century CE no longer had their Temple or their sovereign land

[8] Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement Volume 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 129.

in which to anchor their faith, the sacredness of their place became more about who was gathered and what was experienced than the geographic location or the physical construction.

*Pre-Constantine*

Sacred places continued to have significant meaning for people as the Christian faith emerged and developed in post-biblical history. Similar to the first-century Jews, the emerging Christians practiced their faith absent of a permanent and impressive sacred place. The early Christian movement involved gathering for worship in homes and catacombs, in part because they endured significant marginalization and persecution during the first few centuries CE. Irving and Sunquist point out that the earliest records of Christianity in the Roman Empire are characterized by wide-spread, government-sanctioned persecution including bans on public activity and martyrdom.[9] The in-home gatherings for these first Christians were celebrations involving communion, singing, and the reading of scripture. Their homes were their sacred places because of the acts of faith they practiced there. When the Christians outgrew their own homes as a worshiping space, they designated homes to be set aside as a place to gather together for worship. As Justo González describes in his work on the history of Christianity, "the oldest Christian church, found in the excavations of Dura-Europos and built before A.D. 256, seems to have been a private dwelling that was converted into a church."[10]

[9] Ibid., 82.

[10] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), 95.

González goes on to explain the significance of tombs and catacombs for early Christian worship. He notes that the use was not exclusively an attempt to hide from persecution as much as it was a desire to gather at the burial place of martyrs and other heroes of the faith so as to commune with them when sharing the Eucharist.[11] This depiction of early Christian worship and communal gatherings then indicates that their places were chosen out of prudence and practicality along with a desire to commune with the body of Christ, living and dead. Christian sacred gathering places maintained the primary form of dedicated houses through the third century CE.

*Constantinian Construction*

During the third century A.D., Christianity moved out of the shadows of persecution and into public life under the rule of the Roman emperor Constantine. Upon issuance of the Edict of Milan, Constantine declared tolerance for the Christian religion and the public practice thereof. Up to that point, the people met most commonly in homes, however they were able to now meet more openly and publicly and in larger numbers and spaces. González details how Christians began to construct new places for worship on or near the burial sites of the aforementioned martyrs or they would exhume the bodies to place their remains in the altars of the many new church buildings.[12] During the reign of Constantine and beyond, the imperial influence on the construction of sacred places meant an increase in number and size as well as the inclusion of ornate decor and opulence, like fine marble and rich tapestries, that had not been characteristic of Christian church buildings prior. Church buildings were constructed in major cities across the

[11] Ibid., 95.
[12] Ibid., 125.

empire at the instruction of the emperors and typically took the form of the basilica, with the church buildings of the bishops being given the name *cathedral*.[13] These sacred places were constructed and at times financed by the emperors in part to honor God with the grandeur, but also to "perpetuate their memory by building great churches."[14] Christian sacred places take the primary form of dedicated church buildings beginning in the fourth century CE. As Christianity spread throughout the empire, the buildings grew larger, more ornate, and more frequent in their construction over the centuries and gave rise to the architecturally impressive cathedrals recognizable around the world today. Christian church buildings have become so much a part of the landscape of the industrialized world that Bishop Richard Chartres observed that the Church of England has more parish buildings in England than there are post offices. [15]

*Europe to America*

Chronicling the global development and construction of church buildings down through Christian history is beyond the scope of this work and as such, this paper will move on to the construction and use of Christian sacred places from the era of European cathedrals to the settlement of the colonies that became the United States. The rise of the Puritan movement in seventeenth century England in the wake of the Protestant Reformation included for its adherents a rejection of ostentatious and elaborate worship, including the buildings in which the worship took place. The Protestants were the primary religious group represented by the American settlers and the first houses of

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[13] Ibid., 126.

[14] Ibid., 126.

[15] Richard Chartres, "Church Buildings: Blessing or Burden?" *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 17, no. 3 (2015): 321-331.

worship constructed in America reflected Puritan values. Anne Loveland and Otis Wheeler address the form function of the earliest American church buildings in their book, *From Meetinghouses to Megachurches*, and they identify that "the seventeenth century Puritan meetinghouse was an unpretentious, unadorned structure built of wood and quite modest in size."[16] Loveland and Wheeler also identify that the Puritans viewed their meetinghouses as suitable for both sacred and secular uses, often using them for worship services as well as elections, public gatherings, and forts. Even when they decided to build structures used exclusively for worship, they still did not regard it as an "intrinsically sacred structure."[17] The simple structures suited fledgling churches in a new land. Resources were limited and basic survival needs along with the establishment of settlements required attention and investment.

Along with the Puritans, another notable example of sacred places in early American Christianity is the rise of camp meetings. These revival-style worship gatherings became commonplace during the Great Awakenings of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. A contributing cause of the birth of camp meetings was the field-preaching style of people like George Whitefield, who brought it with him from England where he was part of the early Methodist movement. Camp meetings were characterized by an outdoor setting, large numbers of people, and emotional preaching and response. Fredrick Norwood includes notes from a camp meeting participant in his book on the history of American Methodism. Norwood says, "Throughout the memoirs two themes are intertwined: strongly emotional personal religious experience and a

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[16] Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (UK: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 7.

[17] Ibid., 7.

woodsy setting. Both are essential."[18] The sacred place for camp meetings wasn't a building at all, but rather the open air of a natural setting. Although it has waned greatly, the practice of camp meetings continues in parts of the southeastern United States today.

Beyond Whitefield's preaching as part of the rise of camp meetings, Methodists had further influence on the identity of sacred places in American Christianity. Because of their willingness to preach and minister outside a traditional church building, Methodist and Baptists in particular had great evangelistic success and experienced significant growth during the time of westward expansion in the United States. In volume 2 of his work on Christian history, González points to revivals on the frontier as part of the cause of their rapid growth.[19] Methodist influence on early American Christian life as it related to church buildings included the influence of another founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. Wesley was an Anglican priest in England during the eighteenth century who joined George Whitefield in the scandalous practice of preaching in the fields to commoners as opposed to in the proper place in the pulpit in the church.

As the Methodist movement grew and took shape within the Anglican Church, so did Wesley's influence, including his preference to use resources to provide for the needy rather than adorn people or places with expensive decor. Wesley was concerned that investment in church buildings would inhibit investment and attention to ministry. Matthew French writes about Wesley and early Methodist class meetings and the new church building they had just built in Bristol. French says, "At one point, the debt of the

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[18] Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 158.

[19] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 246.

building in Bristol became the primary concern of the small group meetings, overriding their regular meeting activities. The focus of the ministry was taken away from the development of the body of Christ among the believers and put on the discharge of the debt incurred for the physical building."[20] Wesley is also believed to have added a personal admonition to accompany the first Book of Discipline of the Methodist Church in America in 1784 saying that all preaching-houses should be plain and decent and no more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable. Wesley's concerns about the burden of the cost of church buildings and the potential to impede ministry sound particularly prophetic today.

Loveland and Wheeler highlight the impact that tent revivals had on decisions about Christian meeting places. By the mid-nineteenth century, revivalist preachers were not only erecting giant tents, but they were also renting meeting halls, vacant buildings, schoolhouses, barns, and theaters. They quote revivalist Jacob Knapp as saying it was "a matter of discretion whether we preach in a dedicated building, an ordinary dwelling, a barn, or the open field."[21] Filling large tents and theaters with eager worshippers and likely converts eventually inspired the next wave of church buildings. As America continued to expand in territory, population, and wealth, the preference for small, plain and unadorned church buildings was replaced by what Loveland and Wheeler call auditorium churches.[22] These large church buildings were located in the major cities with more affluent church members. As a famous example in the southeastern United States,

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[20] Matthew French, "The Debate on the Necessity of Church Buildings Through the Lens of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," *Methodist University Monarch Review*, Vol. 4 (2017): 28.

[21] Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (UK: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 21.

[22] Ibid., 33.

the Ryman Auditorium, home to the Grand Ole Opry, was constructed near the turn of the twentieth century as the Union Gospel Tabernacle to give Methodist evangelist Sam Jones a stage and an auditorium with which he could preach to thousands of people at a time.[23] The Ryman was also home to lectures, play, and concerts in keeping with the multi-purpose use that was characteristic of the day.

Also at the turn of the twentieth century, the series of Jim Crow laws that were enacted, particularly in the southern United States, segregated black people in public places, including church buildings. González notes that during this era "blacks who had attended [white] churches as slaves were now encouraged to leave them, and this in turn gave rise to various black denominations."[24] The sustained growth of Christianity through the twentieth century, both in terms of adherents and resources, coupled with the inclination to new and more austere auditoriums, along with the proliferation of denominations based on race or creed, has led to an unprecedented increase in the number and size of church buildings in the United States. This church building trend, as described in the opening pages of this work, has put the American Christian church at-large in a tenuous spiritual and financial position.

## Themes

Reflecting on the history of sacred places throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition provides helpful understanding for how and why we are where we are. People set aside or constructed places to signify and remember encounters with God. They built places to be

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[23] https://ryman.com/history/

[24] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume II: The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 252.

a physical representation of the presence of God in the world and in their vicinity. They built places as an act of worship and to be a place to worship together. They also built places mindful of their surroundings, their circumstances, and their size and with the intention of using those places to evangelize and to edify. With these themes in mind, we will turn our attention to the modern era of church buildings and what is being done about the pending church building crisis before we then look ahead to what could be done next.

## SECTION TWO: ATTEMPTS AT ANSWERS

### The Power of Place

A prevalent opinion in the history of the American Church and beyond, as evidenced by Bishop Chartres ʾcomment noted above, is that the church building should be prominent and central. Joseph Stiles advises that churches should always be looking to acquire property and build buildings as a means to grow their presence in town.[25] The result of this approach to church building has resulted in many downtown, mainline churches being located on some of the most valuable land in their city, and occupying large, recognizable buildings. The pastors of three such United Methodist churches in Atlanta, Miami, and Los Angeles, all acknowledged in an interview that they serve churches fitting this description. The trend continues today, as modern megachurches are recognizable for their land and buildings and are acknowledged in the real estate industry for having a positive impact on property values. In a study of megachurches published in the Cornell Real Estate Review, Daniel Wright observed that because of their prominent buildings and large, or multiple campuses, megachurches are community catalysts with political and social influence and they provide support for strengthening and growing the community in which they have a vested interest by way of their significant real estate investment.[26]

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[25] Joseph Stiles, *Acquiring and Developing Church Real Estate* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 20.

[26] Daniel Wright, "Megachurches: A Growing Community Anchor," *Cornell Real Estate Review* 15, no. 1 (2017): 68-77.

Much like the Israelites when they built the Temple and the Christians who built their cathedrals, many churches today have acquired prime real estate and built prominent buildings in their community. It is worth noting that just how prime the real estate is and how prominent the building is, are relative. In their work on the adaptive reuse of religious buildings in America, Robert Simons and Gary DeWine observe that in order to understand the factors affecting a church's decision to dispose of or abandon her property, it is important to understand how the patterns of development and demographic shifts around them are at play. They outline five different types of areas with distinctly different factors of influence:

> The location of buildings that no longer serve the sacred purpose for which they were constructed is, in part, a function of patterns of development and decline in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas in the United States, as well as denominational change. These now redundant or surplus structures are found throughout metropolitan and rural areas. These areas include central cities and their historic downtowns, older inner-ring suburbs adjacent or in proximity to these core cities, bedroom communities and suburbs, rural areas, and rural towns and villages.[27]

Location and social patterns are two important factors when considering what can and should be done with church property. Small town property values don't compare to those of Miami or Los Angeles, and yet church leaders recognize the importance of having a physical and visible presence in a community. In an interview conducted by the author with Rev. Mitchell Boone of White Rock UMC in Dallas, Texas, Rev. Boone said that their church made a strategic decision not to close, sell, or relocate because they did not want to communicate to their neighbors that they had given up on them or that God

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[27] Robert A. Simons and Gary DeWine, *Retired, Rehabbed, Reborn: The Adaptive Reuse of America's Derelict Religious Buildings and Schools* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017), loc. 554.

had given up on them. Even with churches, another age-old adage still applies: the three most important things in real estate are "location, location, location".

## Staying Put

Unfortunately, the drive for churches to buy land and build facilities as a means of establishing a presence in their community has led to an increasingly common problem. More and more churches are dealing with aging buildings that were initially expensive to build and are now expensive to maintain. James Hudnut-Beumler likens this problem to that faced by people as they age and their nest empties, and they discover themselves living with too much house. Acknowledging that there are many factors at work that can bring a church to this point, Hudnut-Beumler addresses the complexities of place this way:

> We get a situation where congregations are overinvested in property in particular locations. At one level this investment is a strength. Congregations do not desert neighborhoods the way drugstores, film-developers, and fast-food outlets do. Persistence in place is often a virtue in a market- and change-driven society. However, when churches become servants to their property, what was a strength often becomes a liability. Churches are then implicated in a pathology sometimes called the 'edifice complex. 'Since so much organizational effort and financial resources are tied up in maintaining a physical presence, in a particular place, one of the key things every congregation needs to ask itself is whether its home suits its mission now and whether it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.[28]

Many downtown, mainline churches are facing this scenario: they are located on some of the most valuable real estate in their city and have large, expensive, aging buildings which now house their aging and dwindling congregations. This begs the

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[28] James Hudnut-Beumler, *Generous Saints: Congregations Rethinking Ethics and Money* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999), 43.

question: *what will become of the large, impressive, expensive campuses of the megachurches of today?*

This problem is not reserved for large, downtown, mainline churches but affects churches large and small whether they are in urban, suburban, or rural areas. The financial and attendance declines mentioned above are indicative of a pattern of having stayed put as is and are now creating greater and greater uncertainty for churches about their future. Robyn Friedman wrote in 2015 about the record number of church properties being sold in the United States. Friedman cites data from a CoStar Group, Inc. reporting the rise in the number of church properties sold from 889 in 2010 to 1,502 in 2014. Similarly, the total value of the sales rose from $579 million to $1.3 billion.[29] That is a 70% increase in the number of church buildings sold and a 124% increase in the value of them, in just four years.

For many churches, this path of staying put with the building and property they have, coupled with shrinking resources and non-existent impact, is not only a financial matter, but a spiritual one as well. In his book on stewardship in the local church, Ronald Vallet reminds his readers of the words of Jesus, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Vallet applies this principle to the congregation's budget. He turns to the topic of church buildings as a part of the budget and observes, "When money goes into buildings and structures, surely the heart will follow . . . church buildings by virtue of their expense, mammoth size, and immovability may be viewed as

[29] Robyn Friedman, "Churches Redeveloping Properties to Give Them New Life" *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/churches-redeveloping-properties-to-give-them-new-life-14
43519001.

counterproductive to the fulfillment of God's mission for the church. To become a household of God will require a new vision and point of view."[30] Although his comments were made twenty years ago, Vallet seems to have identified a problem that is being experienced now. Churches who have eschewed the need to consider a new course of action regarding their property are being forced to let it go at an alarmingly increasing rate.

## Staying the Course

Naturally, a solution would be to stop declining and start growing. This is where Vallet's words come full circle and sober consideration must be given to the impact of the building investment and ongoing expense on the health and long-term viability of the congregation. Ray Bowman and Eddy Hall explain from their experience that even a growing church runs a risk by building: "In far too many cases building programs have killed or at least slowed the growth of vital congregations. Why? A major reason is that the church's focus changes. Most church growth occurs because a church effectively ministers to people's needs. Its focus is on people. But often, when a growing church builds, its focus shifts from people to building. That change of focus kills church growth."[31] A church staying this building-focused-course is exposed to the negative impact on church ministry. This is not only the concern of dying churches, but also of growing ones.

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[30] Ronald E. Vallet, *Congregations at a Crossroads: Remembering to be Households of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 103.

[31] Ray Bowman and Eddie Hall, *When Not to Build: An Architect's Unconventional Wisdom for the Growing Church, Expanded Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 32.

The North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church has recently conducted a high-level analysis of their roughly 850 churches and identified 200 of them that have fewer than 25 people, report having no baptisms or professions of faith in recent history, and show no evidence of meaningful engagement with their community. Similarly, their buildings are aging along with their congregations and their resources are insufficient to maintain ministry. These churches are located in a variety of settings, urban, suburban, and rural across north Georgia. Similar assessments are being done by denominational leaders in the United Methodist Church in other parts of the United States like Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and the Pacific Northwest. This particular example of one region of one denomination is indicative of the broader truth that more and more churches are finding that the decision to stay the course in their budgeting and ministry plans is insufficient to improve their reality.

## Cutting Back

As referenced earlier, many churches are reaching the point where they can no longer afford to fund the maintenance and upkeep of their facilities. Because these are often fixed and/or escalating costs, churches make spending cuts everywhere else they can in the budget before they arrive at the building costs as the final unwieldy expense. These cuts typically mean a reduction in staff or ministry expenses thereby reducing the resources with which a church can maintain fruitful ministry. Writing about her own experience as part of a church staff wrestling with the reality of an already-whittled church budget and an apparent deficiency of ministry, Rebecca Wright draws on Jesus ' parable of the three servants to note that simply maintaining or burying the resources that

have been given the church is not what is best. She writes, "We have been entrusted with a church facility. It is not enough to clean up after our own activities and then lock up the facility so that no one can mess things up."[32] Historically it has not been uncommon for a church in that place to eventually decide to sell the property or even close the doors permanently.

## The Ethical Stance

Other concerns raised about staying put or staying the course with church-owned land and buildings are the ethical implications. These can range from environmental to economic to moral. Mark Torgerson raises up the idea of creation care as a vital part of the Christian life and explores in depth the way in which churches can see how and what they build as opportunities for responsible creation care. Torgerson says, "Greening the built environment of a faith community is a powerful way to achieve and model a commitment to creation care."[33] The environmental impact of buildings is not unique to churches. However, given the responsibility felt by many Christians to care for creation, churches could be said to have a moral obligation to occupy land and buildings in a way that minimizes any negative impact on the ecosystem and natural environment in which they locate.

There are many facets to the moral economic considerations related to church buildings. One consideration is the direct implications of spending what is often a large

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[32] Rebecca Wright, *The Building as Ministry,* (Atlanta: The National Institute in Church Finance and Adminstration, 1995), 8.

[33] Mark Torgerson, *Greening Spaces for Worship and Ministry: Congregations, Their Buildings, and Creation Care*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999), 59.

sum of money to buy land and build buildings. Every dollar that is spent on the facility is a dollar that is not spent in ministry in some other way. Add to that the compounding concern of debt related to church facilities. Borrowing substantial sums of money in order to buy, build, or renovate not only costs the initial sum but also potentially years of interest. Bowman and Hall address it this way: "Whenever I analyze a church's finances and discover that their financial priorities are out of balance, almost always the culprit is debt. Debt allows us to live beyond our means, to build on our schedule rather than God's."[34] Debt repayment as a hindrance to ministry has been identified by experts like Bowman and Hall and has been the lived experience of church pastors, leaders, and bookkeepers alike.

Another, although more abstract, concern about the ownership of land and buildings by churches is moral in nature. Theologian Ulrich Duchrow and economist Franz Hinkelammert co-wrote about the moral implications of private property ownership and argued that "private property ownership produces the destruction of people's way of life and of Nature."[35] By claiming ownership of a piece of the community and of Nature and then exerting further control via construction, is the church participating in a system that is inherently harmful to the way we were created to live? Duchrow and Hinkelammert say yes, and offer the solution that churches can divest of property ownership altogether as a way of rejecting such a system. While this view seems a bit extreme, the concern is worth consideration. At least it could cause a church to pause and

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[34] Bowman and Hall, 137.

[35] Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert, *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Captial*, (New York: Zed Books, 2004), 78.

consider how it is impacting the neighbors when deciding what to do with its land and buildings.

## Caught Off-Guard

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought much of the world to a halt, from businesses to schools to churches. In particular, churches were advised to suspend large-group gatherings and most all complied. In many places in the United States, churches completely closed their facilities to use by groups of any size in order to help stop, or at least slow, the spread of the virus. As of the writing of this paper, a vaccine is slowly being made available to the public while in many places in the United States the virus is continuing to spread and diagnosed cases remain on the rise.

For churches like the one given in the opening example, located in an area where cases are high and the number is growing, their church buildings remain closed for the foreseeable future. This has been an unprecedented experience for many congregations. Church leaders are dealing with months without a fully-attended, in-person worship gathering, which for many is the central activity and hub of the church experience. The example church has acres of land that has allowed for church members and neighbors alike to still make use of the church property with outdoor worship services or by walking their dog, flying a kite, or playing disc golf on the nine-hole course. The church staff and leadership are considering new ways to connect with community members via the property and outdoor spaces. Most churches are moving to, or redirecting focus toward, their online worship offerings as a way to alleviate the disconnection felt during the pandemic. Not all churches are so fortunate to have large green spaces on their

campus or a robust online presence, and so a closure of the use of the buildings has taken a toll.

The pandemic appears to be crippling churches who have been caught off-guard while merely staying put or staying the course of decline. One prediction based upon the pandemic is for the accelerated closure of churches or church buildings, due to a greatly diminished ability to gather and give. David Kinnamon, president of Barna Group, claimed in a recent article in *The Economist* that as many one in five churches in the United States could close over the next eighteen months due to the decline in participation brought on by the pandemic.[36] The landscape in which churches exist is becoming increasingly more challenging and uncertain and that doesn't look like it will change any time soon. Churches who desire to survive and thrive after this pandemic and in an environment where such unexpected events could begin to occur with greater frequency, will be well served to plan now for how to minimize the financial burden of the property and develop creative options for how to deploy their land and buildings for ministry.

## Conclusions

Churches in desperation are limited in what they have the time and talent to consider as solutions to their problems. The problems are not only financial but spiritual in nature and are often indicative of stewardship issues on both fronts. Further complicating the problem is the frequency and rate at which communities are changing around churches. In the face of the changes and the harsh financial and spiritual realities

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[36] Staff, "The virus is accelerating dechurcing in America." The Economist, May 23, 2020, https://www.economist.com/united-states/2020/05/23/the-virus-is-accelerating-dechurching-in-america

brought on by significant investment or over-investment of church resources into land and buildings, many churches are struggling for answers. Based on the importance of place, some have decided to stay put and count on their presence in the community to turn the tide of decline. Similarly, churches consider staying the course of their current budgeting and ministry plans, expecting their circumstances to realign to them. Other churches cut back on expenses where possible, often leaving them underfunded for ministry and unable to fulfill the mission that gave them life to begin with. Finally, churches making decisions about the future use of the land and buildings are right to consider the moral and ethical implications and how to be the best stewards and neighbors possible. Because this crisis is a relatively new development that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, attempts at systemic solutions are only just beginning. However, the next section of this work will explore the creativity and community engagement that is being born out of this place of necessity for some churches.

## SECTION THREE: CHURCH. BUILDING. FUTURE.

### Introduction

When churches reach the aforementioned crisis point or see it on their horizon, an increasing number of them are considering new options to respond. Their ancient-made-new perspective is reminiscent of the pre-Constantinian Christian church. This perspective is based on a mindset that land and buildings are assets entrusted to us by God with which we exhibit the characteristics of the kingdom of God combined with a view that our worship of God and the indwelling of the presence of God is not confined

to sacred buildings. This growing movement of re-visioning church property is also reminiscent of early American Christianity with its abatement of a hard and fast line between secular and sacred and a willingness to conceive of church property as an asset for the entire community.

The innovation detailed in the following pages is primarily the work of churches and pastors in a place of desperation. Churches, out of necessity and a desire to stay open, are beginning to reconsider the purpose of their property and get inventive. The early evidence of success by churches on the brink of closure in facilitating and funding new ministry with their land and buildings is inspiring growing and vibrant churches to heed a word of caution about their property as well. Often, the result of growth and vitality is the urge to expand and build. But there is a movement emerging among churches who aren't desperate yet to consider new and different opportunities with their property for ministry. For vibrant and active churches, the possibilities are much greater for what they can do to re-vision their land and buildings as tools for ministry in new and non-traditional ways. They are looking for ways to offer their property to their community and to establish relationships that can be revenue-generating for the upkeep of the property and the funding of ministry. This kind of reflection is now leading even seemingly healthy and vital churches to reconsider building plans as well as future property usage in every form.

Each of the churches and church leaders described below felt the necessity to reassess and do something different. Their contexts were varied and their eventual decisions for renewal were unique. Their individual circumstances are vital to understanding their success. No two churches and no two communities are alike. Context is key for any church making decisions about how it will be in ministry. Given their

differences, there are still some commonalities among their experiences and efforts that can be helpful examples for other churches and leaders considering a similar course of action. The commonalities include working from a strong theological grounding, adopting a thoughtful and intentional process, identifying and addressing problems, and staying focused on the ultimate purpose of the property for ministry. Following this common path in the midst of differing contexts caused a range of possible solutions for facilitating future ministry to emerge, from sharing real estate, to repurposing existing property, to demolishing and rebuilding.

## Examples

Exploring the possibilities of what can be done by churches to address this crisis led to the discovery of, and in-depth discussions with, a dozen future-facing churches and church leaders doing new and creative things with their land and buildings in ministry. Many of the congregations considered here faced dire financial situations and they decided they did not want to close their doors. So, they are leveraging the very assets that had been weighing them down, the land and buildings, into a new future with new ministry possibilities. The material that follows is taken from research and interviews with those church leaders and pastors and serves as the foundation for the possibilities that are outlined below.

Neighborhood UMC is a merger of two dying congregations in the metro-Atlanta area who relaunched by selling one property to finance the refurbishment of the other into a shared space between the new congregation and other community partners. White Rock UMC in Dallas, Texas recharted their course by turning their campus and buildings into shared space used for education, arts, feeding, and community development. Smyrna

First UMC in Smyrna, GA absorbed a dying Methodist church nearby and converted the location to a hybrid worship location and community outreach center. These churches all opened up their space to shared use by other organizations. The move required minimal remodeling or reorganization but did not include selling or leasing the property, or making major structural changes.

Ravenna Collaboratory in Seattle, Washington is an innovative venture by the United Methodist Church launched from the endowment and proceeds of sale from a closed Methodist church nearby. It is operated as a co-working space for arts and learning that also houses a worshipping congregation. Los Angeles First UMC repurposed its property into a revenue-generating parking lot and the church meets for worship on the lot under portable tents. University Temple UMC, also in the Seattle area, converted their aging and deteriorating church buildings into a hub for community non-profit organizations while they determined the best future course of action for the congregation. In each of these cases, the church property was repurposed to be primarily utilized, and thus perceived by the broader community, as something other than a traditional church. It typically included major structural changes as well as identity changes for the property.

Miami First UMC in Miami, Florida has sold their property to a developer who will build a high-rise micro-unit condominium building targeting the young professionals moving into downtown Miami. The church bought back the first several floors of the new tower where they will have a sanctuary, offices, and a gym. Atlanta First UMC is in plans with a development partner to lease the land around the sanctuary to be redeveloped into two residential towers. Not only are they the foundation of the physical building, they are also working with the property manager to be integrally involved in building community

among the residents. Churches pursuing this type of property redevelopment demolish all or most of their existing buildings and redesign and rebuild a new structure(s) that will house a church along with other primary uses, often residential. The property takes on a new church identity incorporating a broader purpose.

In addition to these specific church examples, denominational leaders in the Florida and North Georgia Conferences of the United Methodist Church are examining and encouraging opportunities for churches in their areas to pursue new use of their property for ministry. This work includes the conference-wide vitality and property assessments mentioned above along with individual appraisals and feasibility studies on an individual basis. Also included are the consultation of industry experts on property use and development and coaching for churches on how to address the concerns about aging congregations, shrinking giving, and increased costs. Other pre-crisis intervention has taken the form of vital mergers between neighboring congregations, infusions of financial resources to facilitate repurposing or rebuilding, and intentional leadership development and training intended to guide churches in a process of discernment about their future as it relates to their property.

All of these examples of churches doing new things with their sacred spaces for future ministry have some shared aspects. Those who are doing it well and are experiencing revitalization of their ministries and their congregations have a theological framework within which to work, a deliberate process by which they work, a desire to connect with and serve their community, and a willingness to take calculated risks and deal with objections. It is exciting to consider what church property is going to look like

in the future as these ideas flourish and grow as a means to be good stewards of the property and to demonstrate the presence of God in the world.

## Theology

Churches taking on the deep and difficult work of reconsidering how they handle what is often their largest and most expensive asset do so without a firm theological foundation at their own peril. Thinking theologically about land and building use includes reflection on motivation, values, and goals. Having a sense of the history of sacred places and why communities of faith construct buildings is helpful. Understanding a congregation's perception of their nature and purpose in the world gives even greater clarity for church leaders and pastors for how to guide the church forward.

As Miami First UMC considered their prospects as an aging and declining congregation that spent the majority of their church budget every year on their property, they were led by their pastor, Rev. Audrey Warren, to reflect on the biblical concept of resurrection, honing in on the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:39, "those who lose their lives because of me will find them." (CEB) They acknowledged that the few meaningful ministry activities of the church were now fully funded by donations outside the budget. Their budget was shrinking at a rate of 5-10% per year due to the deaths of existing members who were not being replaced by new members. They also acknowledged that their format and facilities were attractive to their aging congregation, but they were not connecting with the next generations of people in their community.

With all of the signs pointing toward the death of their church, they decided to look toward new life. Rather than let death happen to their church, they decided to lay to

rest their old mindsets about church and do something new. Rev. Warren led them through a thoughtful and prayerful consideration of what needed to die in order for new life to spring forth. The congregation was then able to name that the building, which had long been a symbol of faith and life for the church during its 123-year history, was hindering ministry and needed new life. The continually growing cost of repair and maintenance coupled with its desirable and valuable location gave them a glimpse of what the church could become through a death (demolition) and rebirth (new construction) of their building.

Neighborhood Church in the Candler Park neighborhood of Atlanta is the product of the merger of two United Methodist churches within 1.5 miles of each other who were both unable to continue to operate due to decline and the state of disrepair of their facilities. Druid Hills UMC and Epworth UMC voted to merge, which included selling the Druid Hills property to a developer and using the proceeds to renovate the Epworth property in order to house a new congregation that would be formed out of the closures and merger. The merged congregations entered a fallow season of waiting and anticipating the place that was to come. The season included time for the sale of one building and the renovation of another, meaning neither congregation would have the places to worship they had grown to hold sacred. It was also a season to acknowledge the relinquishing of the old congregational identities in order to take hold of a new identity. With the leadership of the pastors of the two separate congregations as well as that of the co-pastors of the newly forming congregation, the people found meaning and direction in the biblical story of the people of Israel and the exodus from Egypt.

Revs. Anjie and Andy Woodworth guided the church to reflect on what was being left behind as they moved from the things that held them captive in the past. They were able to name the oppressive weight of their large and aging buildings as something they were previously beholden to with no apparent relief in sight. Coupled with the burden of fond memories and the awareness of the sacrifices and investments made in the buildings by previous generations, it was difficult for them to see a way forward. It was the vision of a promised land of opportunity for ministry to and with their rapidly changing community full of new neighbors that gave them the inspiration to go.

Being the church for the world and in the world was the primary theological underpinning for the congregation of Los Angeles First UMC as they made the decision to exist without a building. The church sold their property and relocated into downtown Los Angeles with intentions of building a housing development and sanctuary. After constructing the apartment complex, the church met in the gathering room of the complex. After a succession of pastoral changes and missional realignments, the church was at the point of closure. Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow was appointed to the church to cast a new vision for ministry. She led the small congregation through a time of discernment about the identity and purpose of the church in the world. The church identified themselves as the body of Christ for the world who is commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 to "go and make disciples of all nations." (CEB) They decided that investing significant resources into construction of a building would be wasteful and antithetical to their purpose. Instead, they wanted to consider how they could leverage their property to fund ministry out in their community. They wanted to be present, active, and visible in their community as people who love their neighbors. In keeping with that

vision, they decided to rent their property as parking in order to fund ministry and to meet for worship under tents, reminiscent of the tabernacle, on the property.

## Sacred and Secular

Each church and church leader in this study gave consideration and had conversation about sacred space being used for secular purposes. The sacred versus secular distinction is not one confined to church real estate and a broader treatment of the topic is a worthwhile endeavor, however, it is beyond the scope of this work. Churches that are considering expanding the use of their space to include activities or organizations that are not directly related to the worship, study or fellowship aspects of the life of the church come to a discussion about this distinction. In his 1968 work on the topic of secular use of sacred space, J.G. Davies details what he observes as a long history of the use of sacred space for secular purposes. He points back to the house churches of pre-Constantinian Christianity and notes, "[i]n this type of fellowship house or church, sacred and secular would be united, i.e., their relationship would not be one of division, but rather integration."[37] When it became common practice for churches to construct dedicated facilities for the worship of God as early as the era of the reign of Constantine, they relegated religious activity, particularly worship, to that building and the other activities of life elsewhere. This gave rise to a perspective that space set aside for the worship of God is to be used only for that purpose. Note also the observations cited earlier by Loveland and Wheeler that early American Puritans saw no purpose in drawing a distinction between secular and sacred use of church buildings. As dedicated church

[37] J.G. Davies, *The Secular Use of Church Buildings* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 213.

buildings became larger, more ornate, and more sacramental in appearance, so grew the desire to limit their use to something sacred.

Churches who are now doing new and creative things with their sacred space have addressed the perceived divide faithfully and courageously. Neighborhood Church changed the conversation focus from sacred vs. secular to secular vs. profane. They wrote their policies on facility use in such a way as to be welcoming of uses that were not typical of church, but left room for review by leadership based on their judgement as to whether the requested use was profane in nature. Lay leadership at Chamblee First UMC, the example church given at the beginning of this work, expressed the desire to open their facilities to outside use including the sanctuary as an act of hospitality toward their neighbors. One such leader expressed it as a question of which matters more to us and to God: the buildings or the people? University Temple UMC in Seattle, Washington turned the divide inside out. They took the stance that the space is sacred because that is the intention with which it was built and for which it is used. Therefore, anything done in the space out of love for God and love for neighbor is also sacred. It is not the activity that makes the space sacred; it is the space that makes the activity sacred. Addressing the perceptions, concerns, and opportunities related to understanding the nature of sacred space is an important step in the process.

## Process

Jesus 'admonition to his disciples in Luke 14:28-30 to count the cost of following him has both spiritual and physical aspects that are fitting for this kind of work by a church. The fact that he uses the metaphor of someone building a building to make his

point is all the more meaningful when considering the process by which churches reassess and potentially re-vision the use of their land and buildings. Jesus calls for a thorough examination of all that will be required to pursue the life of faith, just as one would do a thorough examination of all that is required to successfully construct a tower. Churches who seek to re-examine the use of their property and consider new and creative options are well-served to follow the teaching of Jesus here and count the cost upfront. There are financial costs as well as time, energy, and relational costs to be considered. Churches, like the ones described in this work, all went through some version of a prayerful, thoughtful, and deliberate process to arrive at their decisions about what to do with their property. As churches run this leg of their journey of faith, they will train their eyes, not unlike a runner, to see what is right around them, what is coming ahead of them, and in the case of running up on intersections or especially challenging terrain, to look twice to be safe.

Frank Parker is a uniquely qualified voice in this field as he is both a Jesuit priest and a Counselor of Real Estate (CRE) teaching real estate-related courses at Boston College. In an article co-written by Parker and Allana McKiernan for Real Estate Issues, they address alternative considerations for churches, and other non-profits, to "recycle" their property when they find themselves in this place of being forced to make decisions about what to do with facilities they can't afford. They explain: "The key tactic for assisting these groups is to recycle disposable realty either by sale, adaptive re-use, or

creative joint venture entrepreneurial projects."[38] Sheri Lozaro, founder of Link2Lift, calls this "re-turning" underutilized space to the community.[39]

Parker and McKiernan warn that this advice doesn't come without caution or caveat. They warn, "Carrying out this suggestion is often not as easy as it may seem. It is imperative that the nonprofit organization in question and its advisors are able to conceptualize the various complications that may arise during any real estate transaction, especially those to which non-profit organizations are particularly susceptible to encounter."[40] It is precisely these concerns and the lack of expertise that has often kept churches from considering creative solutions. Thanks to the work of Parker and McKiernan and others like them, along with the rising tide of necessity, these new creative options are becoming more and more of a possibility.

White Rock UMC began the journey of re-visioning the use of their facilities for ministry shortly after the appointment of Rev. Mitchell Boone. The church then brought Neil Moseley on staff to assist in the process and implementation of any plans. Rev. Boone and Mr. Moseley first led the congregation through theologically grounded conversations about identity and purpose as mentioned in the previous section. Then the church went through an honest assessment of their current state which included naming an outdated leadership model, an untenable financial position, and a facility that was

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[38] Frank Parker and Allana McKiernan, "CREs and Non-Profits: Counseling Denominational and Educational Entities in Today's Changing Real Estate Environment." Real Estate Issues 23, no. 3. (1998): 35.

[39] Link2Lift is a consulting group that partners with non-profit organizations to help leverage underutilized space. The co-founder, Sheri Lozano, spoke to a group of United Methodist Clergy in Atlanta in 2018 about ways to creatively repurpose unused or underused church spaces.

[40] Parker and McKiernan, 36.

expensive to maintain and largely unused. They also made time for reflection upon the good things that had happened in their history and in their building as well as lamenting the losses they felt and may feel as they consider a new use for their sacred space.

It is important to note the support, or at least lack of opposition, that the church received from their denominational leaders. Rev. Boone, Mr. Moseley, and other key leaders kept the appropriate United Methodist regional leadership informed about the process and the steps being taken along the way. Their process then brought them to look outside of their church at their community and consider the needs that existed around them as well as what resources they had at their disposal to help meet those needs. Their outward facing work included conversations with community members and leaders as well as involvement in civic organizations and meetings. The church began slow and small, opening up outdoor space on campus for use and then gradually expanding to include unused indoor space and eventually sharing already-used space. They invited neighbors and community stakeholders into conversations about use of their space and considered concerns expressed about increased traffic and noise and changes to the church's appearance. They also engaged the services of experts like an attorney to help write space usage agreements and a tax professional to help address the tax implications of the church having income that is unrelated to their primary function.

Tearing down existing church buildings and replacing them with buildings intended for an entirely different use was a daunting prospect for the members of Atlanta First UMC. It was essential to have a thorough and well-thought out process for this kind of project, especially in the heart of a major metropolitan area. When Atlanta First United Methodist Church began the conversation among their leadership about creative ways to

use their property to meet the needs of the city and to generate revenue for ministry, they understood it would take the support and participation of the congregation as well as denominational and civic leaders. Their pastor, Rev. Jasmine Smothers, and other key leaders first discerned the willingness of the congregation to support non-traditional development on church property. Then they invited input from local elected officials and neighboring property owners which helped identify the need for property to develop affordable housing for seniors and families.

The eventual redevelopment plan would require rerouting of a city street that separated two church-owned parcels of land, so the appropriate officials in the city of Atlanta were involved in the process to help redesign the roads. The church consulted with appropriate leadership and real estate experts in the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church for perspective and guidance in order to put out a request for proposal for a construction firm to partner with the church to develop residential towers on their property. After reviewing proposals and selecting a partner firm, the church and construction firm enlisted the involvement of architects, attorneys, and consultants to create a plan. The plan included a long-term land lease to the developer, the creation of new legal entities to represent the ownership interests of the church and partner firms, as well as contracting with experts in tax law, securing subsidized housing grants, senior housing management, and urban design. The process took years of patience and was iterative in nature as the collaborative work of the team became a feasible plan.

Launching Ravenna Collaboratory in Seattle followed another iterative process that is still unfolding. Rev. Neal Sharpe was originally appointed by the United Methodist Church to the Capital Hill neighborhood in central Seattle to plant a new church aimed at

drawing artists and other creatives who populate that area. However, the denomination sold the property in that neighborhood years prior and real estate was too expensive for the church to re-enter the area. Nearby, the Ravenna UMC in north Seattle had declined to the point that they could no longer afford to continue. The Ravenna congregation expressed a deeply held desire to see the site continue as a church rather than be sold and converted to another use so they agreed to close and let their property and their endowment go toward the launch of a new congregation. Rev. Sharpe took pastoral responsibility for launching that new congregation at the site of Ravenna UMC.

The denomination had successfully planted a new congregation ten years earlier in south Seattle called Valley and Mountain, which includes a co-working space for social change organizations and artists. The process for launching a new congregation in Ravenna started with Rev. Sharpe serving on the ministry staff at Valley and Mountain to better understand the collaborative model of church and co-working while developing the plan for Ravenna Collaboratory. The Ravenna property required significant investment to repurpose the building from a church to a co-working space, and Rev. Sharpe expressed concern about the long-term viability of the Ravenna Collaboratory on that site due to the ever increasing maintenance costs. A possible next step in the process, according to Rev. Sharpe, is that Ravenna will become a satellite location for Valley and Mountain to reduce other overhead costs and leverage the brand for greater visibility and interest from investment partners and co-workers.

## Stakeholders

Involvement in the process by all interested and affected parties is another vital component of church property use decision making. Some examples of such stakeholders

were listed in the previous section, but the subject is deserving of specific treatment here. Decisions made in a vacuum absent of the voices of those whom the decision impacts have a small likelihood of success. Church leaders and pastors who see their entire church as valuable and worthy of respect will seek their input and consider their perspective when repurposing or redevelopment decisions about church property are being made. Churches that understand their identity and purpose as being linked to the wellbeing of their wider community will value their input as well. Churches who work through the process with open eyes to see all who are connected to their decisions, directly or indirectly, will work to identify those persons and groups and solicit their contributions to the process.

Smyrna First UMC, an active and growing church in the suburbs of Atlanta, looked deeply and broadly for input from stakeholders as they embarked on the journey of a missional merger with nearby Tillman UMC. Tillman was on the brink of closure for many of the same reasons cited earlier, but the church property was well-situated to be a place for meeting the needs of the community. Smyrna UMC, under the leadership of Rev. Derek Porter, began a conversation with denominational leadership and the pastor and leaders of Tillman UMC about a merger. Denominational leaders expressed a desire to see a church in ministry in the community around Tillman and a willingness to support the merger. The leaders of the churches held listening sessions with members of both congregations to hear their hopes and fears about their churches and the possibilities of repurposing the Tillman property. Listening closely to the people of the Tillman congregation, they heard both remorse for the loss of the church as they had known it and a willingness to try something new from the people who were most invested. Listening

closely to the Smyrna congregation, they heard concern over a new and expensive expansion of ministry along with a deep love for the community and a desire to make a material impact in the lives of new people for the sake of the kingdom of God. The church leadership also met with local police and business owners to develop a plan for how to effectively offer community services on the Tillman site while causing as little disruption as possible to their neighbors. They listened to concerns from other helping organizations in the community about overlaps or gaps which led to the identification of ways to coordinate and collaborate.

The impact of stakeholders continues beyond the developmental stage. The community resource center that has taken shape on the former campus of Tillman UMC, now called Tillman House, solicits feedback and suggestions from people receiving services and support in order to offer the best experience possible in the name of Jesus. Smyrna was intentional and diligent about seeking input from all the various stakeholders related to their creative repurposing of the Tillman property, and the result was a new ministry that was well-received and supported in the church and in the community.

University Temple UMC spent a period of years discovering how diverse and far reaching their pool of stakeholders could be as they considered repurposing their property beyond traditional church use. After recognizing that their congregation could not support the maintenance and upkeep of their facilities, they started renting space to non-profit organizations to offset costs. This led them to host and get to know the local campus ministry as the church is located in downtown Seattle adjacent to the main campus of the University of Washington. It also brought about a relationship with the campus bookstore for whom they host guest authors to speak. Listening to the students and campus

representatives revealed the problem of teen and student homelessness in the areas around university. The pastor, Rev. Pat Simpson, also got involved with the informal group of adjacent business owners known as the "Alley Neighbors Group." This led to greater awareness of the growing homeless and addiction issues around them. In response, the church decided to open its unused fellowship hall as a shelter for homeless persons.

By listening to the people staying in their fellowship hall and to the alley neighbors, church leaders learned of a mobile needle exchange program operated in their shared alley by the People's Harm Reduction Alliance. The church deemed the cause worthy and, hearing the neighbors 'concerns about the current location, the church decided to give space in the building to be used for the exchange program. The controversy associated with this decision will be addressed in the following section on problems. Currently, the church is going through a process of discerning whether to invite proposals from developers to demolish the building and rebuild something new on the site that could facilitate and/or fund future ministry. An integral part of this process for the church is listening to all of the neighbors and community stakeholders they have come to know in order to understand what would be the best use of their property for everyone.

## Problems

Any time a church considers changes related to their property, problems can be expected. Whether the change is related to the color of the carpet or the use of the building or demolition and reconstruction, there are bound to be opinions, concerns, and

objections as well as challenges and hurdles along the way. Churches who successfully re-envision, repurpose, or rebuild their facilities navigate the problems with faith and fortitude. Difficulties encountered along the way can often prove helpful in refining the process and when dealt with appropriately can produce a better outcome.

The problems around homelessness encountered by University Temple UMC were complex and difficult to navigate. Their willingness to house homeless persons in their fellowship hall met with disapproval by some congregants concerned about building care. The church created service opportunities for its members to support the persons staying in their fellowship hall and to help make sure the areas of the building in use for this ministry were attended to and maintained. The alley neighbors also expressed concerns about the church attracting vagrants to the alley with the efforts to house homeless persons combined with hosting the needle exchange program. The concerns of the neighbors were not only about the church but indicative of a larger shared problem around a perceived lack of police presence in their community to provide safety for the alley neighbors as well as the people coming to the church to receive care and support. In response to the concerns, the church contracted with a private security company to have security personnel on site, especially during the operation of the needle exchange program. By listening and faithfully addressing the problems rather than ignoring them or giving up, the concerns were alleviated as best as possible.

Neighborhood Church encountered unique challenges related to merging two congregations and lying fallow for a season to start fresh as one united congregation in the newly renovated space of one of the merged churches, the renovations of which were paid for with the proceeds from the sale of the property of the other merged church. That

sentence is a lot to read, much less live through. Both congregations struggled with loss of identity and loss of their religious home along with the problem of not having a regular worship gathering or other expected church activities until the future new (old) property was ready. There were moments where they all, people and pastors alike, second-guessed their decision to go through with this new plan. Much of their problems were internal and matters of the heart and the spirit, as opposed to logistics or process.

Revs. Woodworth described spending the majority of their energy and focus in the early stages of the process helping the congregants express and process their grief and navigate the liminal time between what was and what would be. They also regularly reminded the people of the vision of a church for the community where new people could find a place to call their spiritual home. The pastors shared a comment by one particularly hurt and concerned congregant who asked, "When was the decision made that the church is for the community and not for us any more?" Grieving is a process, and the pastors regularly reminded the people of their theological framework of exodus and promised land as they moved through the process together. Most of the members of the two original congregations remained involved for the eventual relaunch of the new church, while some found it too difficult to bear. Revs. Woodworth worked to support people who wanted to find a new church home and communicated to them that Neighborhood Church would always be open to them.

## Purpose as the Point

Even with all of this effort and expertise, decision making about buildings ultimately comes back to purpose. It asks the *why* questions: Why do we buy, why do we

build, why do we expand, why do we remodel, why do we sell, and why do we redesign or repurpose? Even if there isn't a felt need for an immediate action related to the property, a regular assessment or audit is a healthy practice to evaluate how the land and buildings are being stewarded as resources for ministry. Unfortunately, the facilities can become the tail that wags the proverbial dog, and ministry ethos and purpose of the church is shaped by the facilities rather than the other way around. Tim Cool has given special consideration to why church buildings matter and he addresses the topic of the purpose of church facilities this way:

> Not all churches have buildings, nor am I advocating that they should. But church facilities are one of the most expensive and most critical tools church leaders use in shepherding God's people. In short, buildings are important pieces in God's mission of building his kingdom. Many building and design firms are becoming more intentional about creating space with the purpose of making disciples. In the next ten years, this focus will continue to grow. And churches will begin to view their buildings as part of their discipleship process.[41]

This brings us back to the history of the work of building sacred places. We have built, and continue to build, places in order to both worship God and embody or represent God's presence among us. The veil of the Temple being torn in two upon Jesus 'death gives us a new way to understand and experience the purpose of our sacred places. Bowman and Hall put it this way: "First, I discovered that *sanctuary* is an Old Testament concept that was abolished in Christ. *Sanctuary* means 'where God dwells, 'and in the Old Testament the Holy of Holies was indeed a special dwelling place for God. But when Jesus breathed his last on the cross, the curtain of the Temple tore from top to bottom and

[41] Tim Cool, *Why Church Buildings Matter: The Story of Your Space* (Nashville: Rainer Publishing, 2019), loc. 254.

opened the Holy of Holies-where God dwelled-to all humanity."[42] They go on to conclude that God no longer lives in a building. According to 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19, God dwells in the hearts of God's people. *We* are the temples of God. If God dwells in and among the people rather than in a physical place, then *the purpose of our church property is not solely or even primarily to house the presence of God, but rather to facilitate ministry among the people*.

The purpose of church facilities is better understood as a place for the worship of God and for embodying the presence of a God who dwells in and among the people, not the building. If the point of our church property is the purpose, and the purpose is understood in terms of a God who is in and among the people, then the role of church property is to facilitate ministry in and among the people. More specifically, all of the people and everywhere, not just in the sacred buildings. For so many churches today that have land and buildings draining their resources, both human and financial, especially in the face of shrinking support and participation, the question looms large: How can they steward well for the future these wieldy and immovable assets so as to be faithful to their raison d'être?

The scenario of an ineffective and/or insolvent church on well-located property with facilities that are infrequently used is not uncommon in the American southeast and, to an extent, in other parts of the United States. These churches often struggle with solutions to their financial problems. Ideally, they reach deeper for the spiritual concerns that underlie their problem and move from there to a re-evaluation of why they exist as a

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[42] Bowman and Hall, *When Not to Build: An Architect's Unconventional Wisdom for the Growing Church, Expanded Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 39.

church. Hudnut-Beumler in *Generous Saints* encourages congregations to go through the difficult exercise of imagining their church buildings burned down. He challenges churches to ask primary questions like,

- Why should we even exist as a church?
- Do we need a building to be faithful to our call?
- Are there opportunities for mission God is calling us to since we are free to start over?[43]

This exercise and these kinds of questions can help a church keep its land and buildings in the proper perspective relative to its ministry. Congregations with a desire to be present and active in their communities in the future keep the mission and purpose of their church in the forefront of their decision-making about their property. Thinking like this has led churches down three related but distinct paths of possible solutions.

## Possibilities

With so much history and investment at stake with church property, knowing what to do and what not to do, and discerning how to be the best steward of these resources is challenging. Additionally, most church pastors, who are often looked to as the leader, don't have the training and knowledge necessary to make major real estate and facilities decisions. Churches who navigate these waters well leverage the wisdom and expertise of their congregations and other community members. They form teams or committees, they solicit input from stakeholders both inside and outside the congregation, and they take the time to develop buy-in. All of the pastors and church leaders interviewed for this work described some form of this process and said it was vital.

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[43] James Hudnut-Beumler, *Generous Saints: Congregations Rethinking Ethics and Money* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1999), 46.

Out of the research and interviews, three distinct paths emerged as possible options for churches that want to pursue new opportunities to facilitate and fund ministry with their property. Sharing real estate, sacred repurposing, and strategic rebuilding are all viable options for churches to use their land and buildings in new and creative ways for the future. These three paths are adaptations of the options offered by Frank Parker and Allana McKiernan in their article referenced earlier. Where Parker and McKiernan suggest sale as a viable option, this paper acknowledges the importance of the physical presence of a church in a community, making that option a drastic last resort and instead recommends redirecting the sale of church property to a more strategic decision to repurpose or redeploy the asset.

*Sharing Real Estate*

As a result of looking inward at the state of their church and looking around at the needs of their community, an increasing number of churches are looking ahead to new and different ways to utilize their land and buildings that doesn't require significant financial investment, long lead times, or major demolition or remodeling. One way for churches to accomplish the goal of redeploying their property for ministry given these constraints is by sharing their real estate with other organizations and entities. In their book *Neighborhood Church*, Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller emphasize that when integrating space with other organizations, "We only share our facility with those who truly want to partner, contributing to the increased spiritual energy and redevelopment of

our congregations."[44] Sharing space with others who have similar goals for their organization and for the community can help everyone involved. Examples of churches sharing their real estate as a way to facilitate and fund ministry are Neighborhood Church, White Rock UMC, and Tillman House as merged with Smyrna First UMC. Each of these churches, after a process of theological reflection, stakeholder inquiry, and asset assessment, arrived at a course of action that involved sharing their property with others for fruitful ministry and growth of the church.

After closure and merger of the two preceding congregations, Neighborhood Church found energy and life envisioning how they might be in ministry in their community. Consulting with neighbors, local business owners, and civic leaders revealed that the community of Candler Park where they were located was lacking in public gathering space, affordable office space, and the presence of needs-meeting organizations. In its relaunch, Neighborhood Church decided that their identity as a church would include providing the place for these needs to be met in their community. The building was centrally located and the renovations necessary to make the building usable for their church would not require significant alterations for it to serve in this capacity. Existing and refurbished children's classroom space could be shared with a weekday preschool, existing adult classroom space could be shared as incubator offices for small businesses and startups, and existing large spaces like the fellowship hall and sanctuary could be shared for hosting civic meetings and other large events.

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[44] Krin Van Tatenhove and Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), loc. 979.

The church has included in its operational plan to be the center of community activity by way of serving as the home to several non-profit organizations and helping-oriented businesses. They utilize a mix of relationships with tenants including rent-free, paid, and reciprocity-based agreements. The proceeds from the paid space rentals subsidize the cost of maintenance and upkeep. The congregation has gained exposure in their community and grown in membership because of the increased foot traffic on their campus and the public perception that the church exists for the community and not for itself.

White Rock UMC took a slow and steady approach to opening up their space to share with their neighbors. They began by offering a plot in their yard to a community garden organizer. Neighbors initially expressed concern about the visible location of the garden so they moved it to a more discreet location on campus. Responding to their neighbors' concerns while still facilitating the garden allowed the church an early win in their community. While the garden grew in size and popularity, the church leadership was also becoming more engaged in their community and heard from community meetings and through neighborhood social media channels of the need for small meeting and co-working spaces. They opened up one hallway of classrooms that were unused during the week to share with two co-working tenants and to be used by parole officers to meet with juvenile parolees.

As the church monitored the experience and saw the success of the efforts in terms of stronger community connections and meeting needs, they opened up more of their classrooms and their fellowship hall to an afterschool program. The growing relationship with the local school through the afterschool program led to the opportunity

to host language classes and offices for three non-profit organizations who support families with kids. The church is now home to a dozen outside organizations and because of their success, they have been given the opportunity to replicate the White Rock model at another nearby Methodist church. In order to further the reach of their work, Neil Moseley recently left the staff of White Rock to dedicate his time to coaching churches on how to go through a similar process of discernment and action for renewal through community engagement.

After closing and merging with Smyrna First UMC, Tillman UMC became Tillman House, a community resource center for an underserved area in Smyrna, GA. The vision and process for the merger went through refinement as Smyrna initially considered other uses for the site like a dedicated second campus for young adult and next generation ministry or a homeless shelter. Through their discernment process, they decided they wanted the facility to continue to house congregational activities such as worship and study as well as be a place to meet the needs in Smyrna. The church now holds a weekly worship service in the sanctuary on Sunday, and during the week that space is used to serve warm meals, host community gatherings, and as a distribution site for food and clothing. The building is home to the youth group and the Boy Scout troop, and the classrooms are used for church small groups at varying times during the week. All these groups share classroom space with the staff and volunteers of Tillman House who meet with people each week to provide support, counsel, and resources. The site is also home to a continuing education center for adults and a distribution site for food and supplies for homeless persons.

The community relationships and partnerships developed by the church through Tillman House created a unique opportunity for ministry during the pandemic. The director of the Tillman House, Alan Nicely, was able to arrange for local restaurants who had been shut down to cook and serve meals at Tillman House to the homeless population in the area, paid for by local partner non-profits who address food insecurity and homelessness. The church is currently in the process of forming a separate non-profit organization that will govern all of the ministry and partnerships at the Tillman House, giving them the opportunity to receive grant funding from charitable organizations that otherwise do not give directly to religious organizations.

All three of these churches found ways to share their biggest and most expensive asset, their property, with neighbors and community members in ways that breathed life into their congregations, expanded their reach into their communities, and did so without substantial modifications to the design and use of their space. For other churches, a more significant change to their property was the best way forward.

*Sacred Repurposing*

Looking ahead to how their land and buildings might best facilitate and fund vibrant ministry in the future, some churches embark on the sacred repurposing of existing space. In other words, a church may, after thoughtful reflection on its mission, its assets, and its community, decide that the best thing to do is find an entirely new and different use for what is currently in place. This repurposing of church property indicates it will be utilized and perceived by the broader community primarily as something other than a traditional church. It will likely include major structural changes and identity changes for the property. The decision is driven by a combination of factors including

finances, community needs assessments, and asset evaluations. This type of approach does not necessarily include the sharing of the real estate with other entities, although that can be a component. Rather, it is the church itself who repurposes the real estate to be in position to be in ministry in the future. Churches like Los Angeles First UMC and Ravenna Collaboratory in Seattle, along with United Methodist denominational leaders across the country, are opting for the sacred repurposing of their space.

Los Angeles First UMC was faced with a decision about what to do with the land they owned in downtown Los Angeles upon which they planned to construct a sanctuary. Having previously sold property and used some of the proceeds to fund an affordable housing development downtown, the church recognized how fulfilling it was to invest in meeting the needs of their neighbors. When discerning next steps about the use of the remaining land, they engaged in an exercise similar to the imaginary fire suggested by Hudnut-Beumler and they asked themselves the question, "Why do we need to build ourselves a big building?" They agreed that the congregation was comfortable worshipping in any setting, the weather in Los Angeles was conducive to gathering outside, and they valued the idea of being present and visible as people worshiping God. Office space was not a priority for them and they agreed they could fellowship and hold classes in places of their own choosing. The enormous expense of building was more than they wanted to spend when they believed they could exist as a vibrant church without it.

Following the original purchase of the land, the Staples Center arena was built down the street and needed land to rent for parking. The church engaged in negotiations with the area and ultimately entered into a lease agreement by which the church land is

made available to be used by the area for paid parking with the exception of Sunday mornings. The arrangement is suitable to the needs and calendars of both organizations and the income generated by the church from the lease pays the operating costs of the church, including salaries, and gives them money to deploy in ministry caring for the significant homeless population in Los Angeles and advocating for justice. Every Sunday the church sets up tents, chairs, tables and sound equipment in the parking lot and celebrates their faith in worship as a witness to their community.

Ravenna Collaboratory embarked on a mission to repurpose sacred space upon the closure of Ravenna UMC in Seattle. Rev. Sharpe witnessed the gentrification of central and northern Seattle area for years and the displacement of struggling young artists and entrepreneurs that came with it. Rev. Sharpe envisioned an effort led by the church to create space for artists and educators to gather, work, and collaborate as an expression of their God-given giftedness. When the local denominational leadership gave Rev. Sharpe charge over the Ravenna UMC property, he utilized the remaining funds from the church endowment along with the proceeds from the sale of a nearby church to redesign and reconfigure the church building into a co-working space. The work included extensive demolition and reconstruction of internal spaces like classrooms and hallways as well as building infrastructure like plumbing and HVAC.

Upon completion of the work, the Collaboratory was branded and marketed in the community as a co-working space geared toward artists and entrepreneurs who are working toward social change and justice. The financial model of this approach calls for the rental revenue from the spaces to cover the expenses related to the maintenance and upkeep of the building. Other funding for staff and ministry is initially from

denominational support and then transitioned over a period of years to being fully funded by the giving of the new congregation. The Collaboratory currently hosts four co-working partners and a cooperative preschool for the community. Rev. Sharpe acknowledges the challenges of lost occupancy and decreased demand brought on by the pandemic, and is considering ways to keep the vision of the repurposed space viable, including merging with the collaborative church from which he launched.

Sacred repurposing of church property takes on a different form at a higher level of church administration. As described earlier, the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church performed an assessment of its 850 churches regarding vitality, viability and property. Along with this analysis, the leadership of the Conference has enlisted the help of real estate consultants, portfolio managers, and brokers to determine if the assets might be better utilized for ministry in a different way or even in a different place. The estimated property value of the approximately 20 percent of the churches in the Conference that will potentially be insolvent or will close in the near future is a combined $34 million. At the heart of this process is a denominational decision to determine whether to close churches and reallocate their assets. The North Georgia Conference closed 24 of these churches at their Annual Conference in 2020, the most in its history, and now must decide how best to redirect those resources for ministry. The Conference plans to form a team to oversee the management and redistribution of the property from closed churches. Regional repurposing of property will be done to ensure that the assets of the church are being deployed and redeployed as faithfully as possible to fulfill the stated mission of the United Methodist Church, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Similarly, the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church has enlisted staff, consultants, and appraisers to evaluate areas within the bounds of the Conference where additional real estate assets are warranted to meet the spiritual needs of a growing population and where there are churches whose property is more valuable to ministry if it is repurposed in some fashion. This kind of regional real estate management is not only happening in the southeast United States. The leadership of the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church has established a new staff position responsible for asset assessment and strategic deployment of the real property of that Conference.

To add another dimension to the idea of repurposing sacred space, Shahla Farzan shared an interesting story in her 2019 report for National Public Radio about church buildings being sold and converted to non-religious uses. Her report centered on a United Methodist church that was sold in 2004 and converted to a bed and breakfast. While the intent of the article is to report on the rising trend of church buildings being bought and repurposed, Farzan notes that this one church building continued to be a blessing even with a change in purpose. She quotes the owner of the converted church building saying,

> Running the bed and breakfast also brings more meaningful encounters. Many of the guests are people who once worshipped here. They come back for weddings, anniversaries or sometimes just to peek inside. Not long ago, the inn hosted a wedding for a woman whose grandparents had been married in the church 80 years ago. For Macheca [a co-owner], having a relationship with that community has been an unexpected gift. 'I thought I was just going to run a bed and breakfast, but that's really not been the case at all, 'she said. 'It's amazing the connections I've made with people. I just love hearing their stories.[45]'

[45] Shahla Farzan, "Houses of Worship Find New Life After Congregations Downsize," *NPR*, August 24, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/08/24/753256634/houses-of-worship-find-new-life-after-congregations-downsize

It is possible that a repurposed church building, even if no longer housing a worshiping congregation, can still fulfill its intended sacred purpose of being a place where people can experience love and joy and be reminded of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in that place. Churches, church leaders, and communities are beginning to consider creative ways like this to repurpose their space as a community asset. This approach helps the church be in ministry in new ways and can help pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the buildings outside the typical tithes and offerings collected from members.

While some have found creative solutions by sharing their sacred space or by repurposing it, others still have looked to more significant, more permanent, and more all-encompassing ventures. Rather than renovating or rebranding or repurposing what is already there, the following are examples of churches who decided to completely and creatively rebuild.

*Strategic Rebuilding*

A third conclusion reached by churches who are looking ahead at new ways to use their land and buildings for ministry is to rebuild altogether. This is the most expensive and time consuming option and typically involves displacing the worshiping congregation along the way. It is too soon to identify churches that have been prompted to go this route now because of the pandemic although, being displaced from the building unexpectedly could be an impetus for such action.

Strategic rebuilding becomes the best viable option when the church envisions a future that looks substantially different than its present reality and the path to that future means the facilities must look equally as different. The examples of strategic rebuilding

offered in the following pages go beyond the idea of simply building a more modern version of existing buildings. This rebuilding is characterized by demolition of all or most of the existing buildings and redesigning/rebuilding new structure(s) that will house a church along with another primary use, such as commercial or residential space. The property takes on a new church identity incorporating the broader purpose. Atlanta First UMC, Miami First UMC, and University Temple UMC have all embarked on the journey to strategically rebuild their property in hopes of facilitating and funding ministry in the future.

Atlanta First UMC in Atlanta, GA is in the midst of the redevelopment of a portion of its property by a developer who specializes in residential developments on church-owned land. The scope of the work includes the church leasing the land to the developer who will then demolish all of the existing buildings, other than the sanctuary, and rebuild in their place two rent-subsidized residential towers. One tower will serve senior adults and the other will serve families. A third-party management company will operate the residential towers, and the church will share in the revenue from the rent as well as receive revenue from the lease of the land.

While retaining ownership of their land, the church is able to achieve their goal of putting the property to use in ministry by offering housing in a metropolitan downtown area where construction of new housing is difficult due to the lack of undeveloped land. The additional housing also meets a need identified by the city leadership by offering a place to live for seniors and for families. The congregation of the church has the opportunity not only to minister to these persons by way of providing an affordable place for them to have a home but also by being their neighbor. The pastoral and lay leadership

of Atlanta FUMC are coordinating with the management company to identify ways the church can connect with and serve the residents of the new towers, such as a daycare, recreational activities, and care and support services.

The other goal achieved by the church in this rebuilding arrangement is that it will generate revenue for the church that can fund ministry. One source of discovered revenue will be the elimination of maintenance costs associated with the buildings that will be torn down. Another source of revenue will be the share of the rental income generated by the residential towers. The increased revenue is expected to both defray the cost of maintaining the over 100-year old gothic-style sanctuary that remains onsite and to allow the church to further fund its ministries of care in the community.

The sharing relationship also creates a benefit to the city by providing housing for its citizens and by encouraging more people to live downtown, thus creating more demand for services and businesses like restaurants and retail stores. This type of strategic rebuilding involves a complex partnership between the church, developer, and management company. All parties involved have spent months in conversation and negotiation to arrive at a solution that is equitable and allows the church to accomplish their stated goals of meeting community needs and funding ministry with the property.

Through the process of theological reflection and naming their identity and purpose described earlier, Miami First UMC understood themselves as a church called to serve the people of downtown Miami, especially the homeless population. They recognized they could not continue in ministry in their current building, but they couldn't leave. After receiving an unsolicited offer to purchase their highly valued property on Biscayne Boulevard in downtown Miami, the church decided to form a committee, set

goals and name values, contract with a broker, and receive proposals for redevelopment of their site in such a way that the property could be used to its full potential while continuing to house the church.

The church eventually entered into a partnership with a developer and sold them the land while buying back ownership of the first ten floors of the new building for use as a church. Developers broke ground in June of 2019 on a 49-story building on the church property. The building will house the church in the bottom ten floors including a sanctuary, fellowship hall, offices, and dedicated entrances and exits. The remaining floors will house 646 rental apartments, 51,000 square feet of commercial rental space, a public lobby lounge, a restaurant, a fitness studio and a co-working space. The church will retain a seat on the tenant activities committee with input into ways to support and enrich the lives of the residents. Proceeds from the sale were used to buy back the first ten floors, establish a church endowment, and fund the redevelopment of a homeless ministry center with which the church partners. According to Rev. Warren, the work by the pastor and church leaders was extensive and time-consuming. The relationship with the broker and developer were vital to the success of the project. The involvement of experts was necessary. The outcome is a strategic redevelopment of church property that generated funds for ministry in the future and gave the church a new opportunity to reach their community.

Strategic rebuilding has been a five-year journey for the congregation of University Temple UMC in Seattle. When they realized they could no longer afford the upkeep on their large, gothic 1920's era building located adjacent to the campus of the University of Washington in downtown Seattle, the church formed a committee, hired a

project manager, and made the arduous decision that it was in the best long-term interest of the church to tear down the sanctuary and replace it. They considered rebuilding a new sanctuary, but that option appeared to put them in the same situation. They considered building and sharing a multi-congregation, multi-denominational facility, but that option fell through with the divergence of perspectives among the potential congregations. They considered low-income housing, but the financial model of revenue did not appear to justify the expense. The church also heard the support of their neighbors for new construction as well as concerns about the aesthetics of a high-rise development, about ruination of historic buildings and gentrification of the neighborhood, and the loss of community investment if the church sold to a national development corporation. In consideration of the concerns of the neighbors and in an effort to achieve the church goals of providing housing and funding ministry, the church arrived at a path forward.

The church sold the air rights of the property to a local developer but will retain ownership of the land.[46] The developer has proposed two residential towers with the church occupying the street level of the new building. In December of 2020, the current building closed and deconstruction began, including architectural rescue of the organ, stained glass, and other artifacts to be retained for the new building. The church will make a donation from the proceeds of the sale of the air rights to the city of Seattle's efforts to address homelessness. The developer, in lieu of making penalty payments, has agreed to set aside a percentage of the residential units as low-income housing.[47] A

[46] Air rights are the legal property interest in the space above the land. They can be separated from the legal ownership right of the land and allow the owner of the air rights to develop the property up.

[47] Rev Simpson explained that the city of Seattle has housing affordability codes that require developers to to designate a percentage of their housing units to be occupied at a reduced rate or pay a commensurate penalty that is used by the city to alleviate homelessness.

portion of the units will also be designated for student housing. The church-occupied space will be designed to continue to be a resource to the community. The funds from the sale will be used to establish an endowment and fund future ministry opportunities. The project has been slowed due to the pandemic, but once completed it will give the church a new worshipping home, relieve them of the burden of mounting building maintenance and repair costs, and position them to care for their community in the future.

Envisioning a different future with respect to the church building is not confined to existing churches looking to redevelop. New churches are also taking a different approach to buildings. New churches are launching with an aspect of their plan that includes intentional use of their sacred space for income generation and community engagement. In a recent article in *Public Square*, a publication of the Congress for New Urbanism, Nathan Norris analyzes a new building approach by a church in Alabama and quotes their pastor as saying, "The 20th Century model for building churches focused on the church buildings, whereas we believe that the future of the church is to focus on how to build the community first."[48] Churches prioritizing building their community over building their buildings are taking church real estate in a new direction.

New York City has experienced significant redevelopment of religious buildings that involved a complete change of use, but retained a sense of purpose. Nadia Mian, a researcher and educator in planning and public policy, explored how and why the churches decided to redevelop their property with non-traditional church buildings. She discovered that the majority of churches redeveloped by building residential space. Of

[48] Nathan Norris, "Re-designing Church for the 21st Century," Public Square, April 22, 2019, https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2019/04/22/re-designing-church-21st-century/.

interest to Mian, from a real estate development perspective, was what role the mission and purpose of the church had in the redevelopment decision. She noted that some churches intentionally redeveloped with residential space that was intended to provide housing to persons who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Other churches built the residences that would bring the greatest financial return on investment. This caused Mian to inquire about the role of institutional isomorphism for churches who redevelop. Some churches seemed to feel strongly about holding on to their function of serving the least among them, even though they were changing the form in which they did so. She raised the question, "How can religious institutions engaging in property redevelopment retain a social component to their institution?"[49] Giving consideration to the purpose of the buildings continues to be important, for people inside and outside the church, as churches build and rebuild for the future.

Beyond these examples, there are attentive church members who have now recognized the need, and opportunity, for strategic rebuilding. A United Methodist Church member in Atlanta who specializes in senior living center development nationwide has offered his expertise to denominational leaders to assist and/or partner with churches who have the desire and potential to rebuild with a vision for a different approach to ministry in the future. The landscape of church development is changing fast and these churches and leaders are all examples of how churches can respond with creativity and care to the changes.

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[49] Nadia Mian, "Prophets for Profits: Redevelopment and the Altering Urban Religious Landscape." Urban Studies 45, no. 10. (2008): 2156.

## Change

Whether it is sharing of real estate, sacred repurposing, or strategic rebuilding, all of the aforementioned churches and church leaders had to deal with change in order to get from where they were to where they felt led by God to go. Len Sweet observed in a recent video shared on YouTube that the pandemic is forcing a change of perspective for churches. He said that because of the Covid crisis, we have realized that "the building of the church is not a building. We have finally become aware that the building of the church does not mean a building. It took a pandemic to kick the church out of its heretical notion that ecclesia is an edifice. The confusion of the church with a building is fatal to mission."[50] The change brought on by the pandemic, forcing churches into a new understanding of their identity, ripples out into their understanding of the purpose and function of their property as well.

Adapting to a rapidly increasing rate of change and to unforeseen challenges requires flexibility, even when it comes to things as seemingly inflexible as land and buildings. This flexibility can be understood in terms of one church or one building or it can be understood in terms of an entire community working to be flexible with its property to adapt and provide for its citizens. Alex Wittenberg quotes Monical Ball, the leader of an organization in San Diego, California called *Yes In God's Backyard*, talking about the sale and redevelopment of church owned property as saying, "[l]and that belongs to faith communities is supposed to be for the services of the vulnerable. If the coronavirus leaves us with more open space to build more desperately needed housing,

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[50] Leonard Sweet, "Count Your Blessings 12 Blessings from the Covid Crisis Curse," August 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgmF5NJVOi0

amen."[51] Wittenberg goes on to describe legislative changes being proposed in California that would allow developers to circumvent certain construction and zoning restrictions if they are building on sites owned by faith-based organizations.[52]

Churches who desire to survive and thrive after this pandemic and in an environment where change is the rule rather than the exception, will pay close attention to the uncertainty and the rate of change in their communities. They will think about their land and buildings in terms of flexibility rather than permanency. And they will be well served to prepare and plan now for how to minimize the financial burden of the property and develop creative options for how to deploy their land and buildings for ministry.

## Conclusions

A review of the history of sacred space demonstrates a strong argument for a church to have a physical presence in a community both as a sign of God's presence and as a place where God's presence can be celebrated and shared amongst people. The sacred place has taken many forms since the altars of the Old Testament, built at times to honor the Creator and at times to immortalize their creators. The proliferation of these places, especially in the southeastern United States, has brought the church to a crisis point at an individual and denominational level. An increasing number of churches are faced with the grim reality of a declining congregation and shrinking budget combined with increased costs to maintain buildings. This scenario frequently leads to diminished

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[51] Alex Wittenberg, "Churches are Building Housing Developments in God's Backyard," Bloomberg CityLab, July 13, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-13/churches-are-building-housing-developments-in-god-s-back-yard

[52] Ibid.

resources for ministry, further restricting the church, until they reach a crisis point to sell their property and/or close the church. Churches faced with this crisis have stayed put, stayed the course, and cut costs, typically to the demise of their ministry and even their church. They have also been faced with ethical concerns about financial stewardship, environmental impact, and land ownership. The added challenge of navigating a world-wide pandemic that forced churches to close their buildings indefinitely has made the situation untenable for many.

There are churches leading the way toward a better and brighter future in the use of sacred space. They are utilizing their land and buildings creatively in response to what they have seen when they look around and what they expect to see when they look ahead. They invested the time and energy to take an honest assessment of their current reality. They established a solid theological foundation from which they could reconsider imaginatively the use of the space. They have involved stakeholders inside and outside the church as they developed a process by which they could address church and community needs, concerns, and goals. They have clearly identified the purpose of their church along with the purpose of their property. Through all of this thoughtful and innovative work, they arrived at solutions ranging from sharing real estate with like-minded organizations, to the sacred repurposing of their property for a different use, to strategically rebuilding from the ground up. All of these creative solutions brought their own set of challenges, which the churches faced head-on and in faith. Now they are examples for how other churches can discover creative new uses of their biggest assets and fund meaningful ministry for generations to come.

Churches that will be faithful and fruitful in the future must evaluate their investment in the purchase, construction, and maintenance of land and buildings regularly. The evaluation process should utilize the dual lenses of presence and purpose. God's presence resides not in the building but within and among the people. This biblical and theological truth releases churches from seeing their buildings as required or reserved for the worship of God. Staying focused on the purpose of the property, which is to enable ministry, will free churches to creatively explore new alternatives to facilitate and fund ministry in the future. In order to turn the tide of dying and closing churches toward vitality and growth, churches must follow this path to transform their sacred spaces from ministry and resource drains into ministry and resource generators.

# SECTION FOUR: THE ARTIFACT

## The BUILDING. FUTURE. CHURCH. Conference

The artifact is a weekend conference designed to demonstrate and inspire creative use of church property for ministry in the future. The artifact was conceived and designed prior to the pandemic and will be executed once conditions are safe for a large group to gather in-person. The many elements of the conference will provide attendees the opportunity to hear from and interact with the pastors and leaders that are the subject of this research as well as the author and each another. Participant engagement elements will include site visits, community discovery, and a real-time case study for analysis in groups followed by evaluation of proposals by a panel of stakeholders. Sessions will include workshops by the speakers, keynote addresses from the author and special guest, and time for the development of strategic next steps by the attendees.

The topic of this work is a developing problem within the church and the possibilities for solutions are numerous and highly contextual. Hosting a conference will allow for discussion, update, collaboration, and discovery among the participants as well as learning and inspiration. The focal point of the conference will be the case study. The host church will serve as an opportunity for the participants to observe and apply what they are learning and thinking to a church situation that is ripe for innovation with its land and buildings. Attendees will be encouraged to flex their creative muscles and work in teams to produce a proposal for future use of the site of the host church. Two proposals will be selected by a panel of stakeholders from the host church to be presented on the

last day of the conference in front of the entire group for review by the panel. Attendees will leave the conference better resourced, connected, and inspired for the creative use of sacred space to facilitate and fund ministry in the future. Section Five contains the outline, goals, plan, and format for the conference inclusive of the supporting materials such as website, forms, and information for distribution to attendees.

# SECTION FIVE: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

**Goal:** To Demonstrate & Inspire Innovative Use of Church Property for Ministry

**Host Location and Case Study:** Chamblee First United Methodist Church (Chamblee Methodist) in metro Atlanta

**Website:** buildingfuturechurch.com

**Time Frame:** Post-covid restrictions, 48-60 hour weekend (Thursday midday through Saturday, with Sunday worship optional)

**Characteristics:**
1. Collaborative: working together with other participants in real-time
2. Experience-Based: deep dives into real-life examples
3. Generative: ideation that produces action-steps for the participants
4. Connectional: create networks for resources and support
5. Resource Rich: provide take-home tools, frameworks, and examples
6. Participatory: test out ideas and plans on an active, actual case study

**Travel:**
Expenses including lodging and meals will be paid for the speakers and at the own expense of the participants.

Chamblee United Methodist Church is located approximately 25 miles from Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta and is easily accessible from the airport via transit (45 minutes) or car (30 minutes). Transit is provided by MARTA. Travel by car from the airport can be both ride share service or rental.

Chamblee, GA is within a 10 minute drive of the Perimeter Mall office and retail area that is home to many shops, restaurants, and hotels varying in price point from $50 to $200+. Participants will be encouraged to book their own lodging as soon as possible. Speakers will be lodged at the DoubleTree Hotel at Perimeter.

Suggested Hotels:
(Advance booking recommended)

DoubleTree
Hyatt Regency
Crowne Plaza
Hilton Garden Inn

Suggested Restaurants:
(Reservations recommended)

Vintage Pizzeria Fudo
Southbound
BLUETOP

**Outline:**

Day One (Thursday afternoon)

- Arrive and Check-in at Chamblee Methodist
- Site Visits
- Social Gathering and Community Engagement

DINNER

Day Two (Friday)

- Case Study Presentation
- Three Tracks & Speaker Intros
- Case Study Refinement

LUNCH

- Keynote Message from Bishop Carter
- First Breakout Sessions
- Case Study Refinement & Submission
- Vendors & Partners

DINNER

Day Three (Saturday)

- Keynote Message from Eric Lee
- Second Breakout Sessions
- Exploration Hour

LUNCH WITH SPEAKERS

- Third Breakout Sessions
- Presentations to Panel
- Application Time
- Speakers Answer Questions

DISMISS

Optional Day Four (Sunday)

- Worship at one of the Site Visit or Host churches

## DAY ONE

The purpose of the first half-day is to set the tone for the conference. This will be achieved by taking the participants to a site where a church is using their property in non-traditional ways to facilitate and fund ministry. The three sites also represent the three different tracks of innovative property use that will be the basis for the breakout sessions, and are the substance of the written dissertation: Sharing Real Estate, Sacred Repurposing, Strategic Rebuilding. Participants will be immersed for the moment in an experience that is intended to spark their interest and challenge assumptions of how church property is used. After the site visit, participants will attend a relaxed social gathering to meet, converse, and hear from a community stakeholder about their experience with innovative church property use.

Site Visits:

Conference participants will be encouraged to arrive on **Thursday early afternoon** for an on-site experience. The experience will begin with site visits to three (3) churches in the metro-Atlanta area that are doing new and creative things with their space. Participants will be asked to sign up in advance to visit one of these sites:

Atlanta First United Methodist Church in the heart of downtown Atlanta

Neighborhood Church in Candler Park just east of downtown Atlanta

Tillman House Campus of Smyrna First United Methodist Church in a northwest suburb of Atlanta

Participants will arrive at Chamblee Methodist and check-in. Upon check-in, they will be given materials with which they can take notes as well as a general outline of the

conference. The participants will then be directed to a room on campus where they will gather with all participants who have selected the same site visit. Each site visit will begin early Thursday afternoon with group transportation from Chamblee Methodist. Travel to the sites will take approximately 30 minutes each way. The site visit will last one hour.

At each site, a representative of the church will give a tour of the facilities and explain how it is being used for ministry in ways beyond what is traditionally considered church use, i.e. worship, classes, and fellowship gatherings. The site visit will not include explanation of the background or process of discernment by the churches to arrive where they are today. The purpose of the visits is solely to give participants a look at an example of a church using it's property in innovative ways for ministry. The details about the process will be part of the presentations by the pastors and/or representatives of the church during the conference.

After the site visits, participants will return to Chamblee Methodist where they will have the option to conclude their evening on their own, or go to a social spot in downtown Chamblee, Contrast Artisan Ales, for refreshments and to get to know other participants. The owner of the brewery, Chase Medlin, is an avid disc golf player and plays regularly on the 9-hole, tournament quality course located on the campus of Chamblee Methodist. He will share with the group his experience as a community member using a church campus in a non-traditional way. Participants will receive one complimentary beverage and any additional will be at their own expense. Dinner will be at the discretion and expense of the participants.

This will conclude the first half-day of the experience and will prepare the participants to hear from pastors and church leaders who have travelled the road of of innovative church property use for the future, and to consider how they themselves would approach the topic for their own church(es) and to put those thoughts to work on a real test case.

## DAY TWO

The purpose of the second day is to inform and inspire the attendees and to provide them with a real-life case study that will be the hands on, experiential opportunity for attendees to practice what they are learning and participate in an immersive experiment with an actual church.

*After breakfast on their own, participants will arrive at Chamblee Methodist* ***Friday morning*** *for the first morning session. If participants did not arrive Thursday, they will be able to check-in on Friday morning before attending the first session.*

Session One

Session one will begin at 9am with all attendees. They will be seated at assigned tables together for each of the large group sessions. Table assignments will remain for the duration of the conference and will be done in order to mix up people. The mix will provide opportunity for networking and to hear values, strategies and ideas from outside the attendees ’usual context.

The session will consist of a 30-minute presentation of Chamblee First United Methodist Church as a real-life case study and one hour of table discussion after the presentation. The case study is a church that is poised to do something new and different with its property to enable ministry in the future. The participants will be provided the background information found on the next two pages for the church and the community and then be challenged over the course of the conference to envision a proposal for how

Chamblee Methodist could use their property in new ways to facilitate and fund ministry for the future.

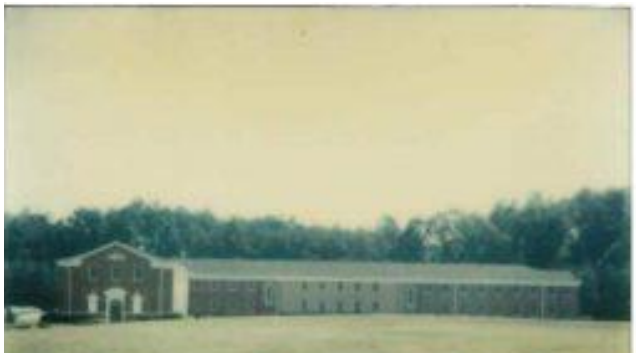
Each table will work on the case study as a group and all groups will be directed to this Form to synthesize their plan into a proposal by the end of the day. Opportunities will be provided throughout the day to collaborate as a group on their concept after researching, seeing the community first hand, and hearing from the guest speakers who have done similar work in their churches. The forms will be submitted to a panel of leaders from Chamblee Methodist and the City of Chamblee. This panel of real-life stakeholders will review the submitted ideas and select two for presentation on Saturday. The two selected groups will be notified by lunch on Saturday and each group will be given 20 minutes during the Saturday afternoon large-group session to present their concept to the panel and field panel questions, in front of the group. After the introduction of the case study, the groups will have one hour for case study research, discussion, and ideation.

*After the case study presentation and group discussions, the participants will have a 15-minute stretch, coffee, and email break before the second morning session.*

# CASE STUDY

Church Building History:

Chamblee First United Methodist Church was founded as Prospect Methodist Church in 1826, without a building, and shared space to worship with the Presbyterian church. In the mid-1800's, the church membership grew to over 500 people and the church purchased six (6) acres of land upon which their first building was constructed. The church existed and grew in this location near the railroad in downtown Chamblee for the next 100 years. In 1961, the church had over 900 members on the roll and became known as First United Methodist Church of Chamblee. In 1963, the church voted to leave the original site and relocate 2 miles away to its current location on over 30 acres on Chamblee-Dunwoody Road. The sanctuary on the new site was opened in 1980. 30 years later, the church began a two-phase capital improvement campaign to renovate the existing facilities and then add new education and gathering spaces. In 2017, the new and renovated spaces were completed and opened for use. In 2019, the church retired the last of the debt on the construction and is currently debt-free.



City of Chamblee, GA:

Chamblee is a municipality in the Atlanta metropolitan area located just inside the northeastern arc of the Perimeter Interstate 285. The city prides itself on being at the junction of several different major modes of transportation. The second busiest airport in Georgia, besides Hartsfield International Airport, is Peachtree Dekalb Airport located in Chamblee. There is a MARTA rail line that stops in Chamblee and the busiest MARTA bus stop is located in Chamblee. Interstates 285 and 85 intersect near Chamblee and Peachtree-Industrial Road, which serves as a major access road to downtown Atlanta, runs through the heart of Chamblee.

Chamblee has experienced exponential growth in both residential and commercial development in the last decade, as can be seen in the history and demographic data provided. The current civic leadership is focused on directing the growth of the city around multi-modal transportation, i.e. rail, bus, bike, and pedestrian.

Chamblee Methodist is the largest of only a handful of churches in the city limits of Chamblee. That said, as part of the metro-Atlanta area, Chamblee residents and those of neighboring communities have easy access to churches around the city, including churches of all size and denominational affiliation.

History of Chamblee  Chamblee Demographics

Primary Neighboring Communities:

Dunwoody, Brookhaven, and Doraville are immediate neighbors to Chamblee and the four municipalities cooperate on regional efforts like economic development, transportation, and sanitation. Their residents also travel frequently among them for access to and around Atlanta, shopping and dining, and recreation. Click their logos for links to more information.

City of Dunwoody Georgia

Brookhaven GEORGIA

THE CITY OF Doraville
Diversity, Vitality, Community

Session Two

The second morning session will be for all attendees and will consist of a 30-minute presentation from me on the results of my research followed by 30 minutes for further group refinement of case study proposals. The results of my research will be presented in the form of three common tracks taken by church leaders and pastors when envisioning creative new ways to facilitate ministry with their property. Each track description will be interspersed with brief video introductions of the speakers who will lead the breakout sessions in which they will address their projects in depth. The three tracks will be presented as follows:

Sharing Real Estate:

This track is characterized by the church opening up their space to shared use by other organizations. It may require some remodeling or reorganization, but does not typically include selling or leasing the property, or making major structural changes. Three examples of this kind of future church building are:

- Revs. Anji and Andy Woodworth, Neighborhood Church
- Rev. Mitchell Boone and Neil Moseley, White Rock UMC
- Rev. Derek Porter, Smyrna First UMC & Tillman House

Sacred Repurpose:

This track is characterized by the repurposing of church property to be primarily utilized and perceived by the broader community as something other than a traditional church. It will likely include major structural changes as well as identity changes for the property.

Three examples of this kind of future church building are:

- Rev. Mandy Sloan, Los Angeles UMC
- Rev. Neal Sharpe, Ravenna Colaboratory
- Keith Cox, North Georgia Conference of the UMC

Strategic Rebuilding:

This track is characterized by demolition of all or most of the existing buildings and redesign/rebuilding of new structure(s) that will house a church along with other primary uses, often residential. The property takes on a new church identity incorporating a broader purpose.

Three examples of this kind of future church building are:

- Rev. Jasmine Smothers, Atlanta First UMC
- Rev. Audrey Warren, Miami First UMC
- Rev. Pat Simpson, University Temple UMC

At this point, I will introduce the question/answer time at the conclusion of the conference. Using this Form, attendees can submit a question that comes to mind during

the conference. The questions will be compiled and reviewed by the presenters and they will each choose one to answer live, in a panel format, on Saturday afternoon.

*After the groups have heard the research results and had 30 minutes to continue discussing and refining their case study proposals, we will break for lunch. The lunch break will be one hour of unstructured time and the food will be provided in-house by a local favorite restaurant, The Mad Italian.*

LUNCH

Session 3

The first session on Friday afternoon will consist of an informative and inspirational message from Bishop Ken Carter, the resident bishop of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Bishop Ken Carter

Bishop Carter served recently as the chair of the Council of Bishops in the United Methodist Church and is a leading voice on the subject of new and innovative ways for the church to engage the world. He is also a leader in the Fresh Expressions movement in the United States, encouraging churches to experiment with non-traditional ways of building faith community in order to reach new people with the gospel. One of his most recent books, entitled *Fresh Expressions*, is co-authored by one of the breakout session presenters, Rev. Audrey Warren.

Bishop Carter will speak specifically to the value and importance of churches rethinking how they utilize their land and buildings to facilitate and fund ministry. The goal of this session is to inspire the attendees as they head into the first round of breakout sessions and then finalize their case study proposals. After hearing from Bishop Carter, attendees will have a 15-minute break to get to their first breakout group.

Sessions 4 (First Breakout)

The purpose of Sessions 4, along with sessions 7 and 8, is to give the attendees an opportunity to hear the details of the process of taking a local church through the steps of doing something different with their real estate, from leaders who are doing it. Each of these sessions will consist of 6 (six) concurrent, one-hour presentations. Each breakout will include a presentation and brief question and answer with one of the nine guest speakers who were briefly introduced in session two. During each breakout session, there will be two presenters from each of the three tracks described above. Session 4 will happen on the afternoon of Day Two and Sessions 7 and 8 will happen on Day Three.

Offering three breakout sessions with six speakers each will give two opportunities for the attendees to hear from a speaker and give each speaker one session where they will not be speaking so they can attend a presentation. During my interviews with the speakers, all of them expressed an interest to hear from others who are similarly motivated. The schedule of presenters for the first breakout session will be:

Sharing Real Estate Presenters:

Rev. Mitchell Boone (Room 1) and Rev. Neal Sharpe (Room 2)

Sacred Repurposing Presenters:

Rev. Derek Porter (Room 3) and Rev. Pat Simpson (Room 4)

Strategic Rebuild Presenters:

Rev. Audrey Warren (Room 5) and Rev. Jasmine Smothers (Room 6)

*After Session 4, attendees will be given a 15-minute break to return to the main room and gather with their table groups for Session 5.*

Session 5

The purpose of this session is to give the groups a final opportunity to refine their case study proposal and submit it using the provided form. They will be reminded to draw from their site visit on Day One, investigating the community and hearing from stakeholders, the inspiration from Bishop Carter, and the presentation of experience they attended.

The length of time for this session will be open-ended and the deadline for submission will be 5:00pm. Upon submission, the proposals will be reviewed by a six-person panel of leaders at Chamblee First United Methodist Church. As noted above, the panel will confer and select two proposals to hear live on Day Three with follow up questions. The two groups will be notified at the lunch dismissal on Day Three and will have the opportunity to present and respond to questions in front of the entire group after lunch.

*Upon completion of their case study proposal, attendees will be dismissed for the evening for dinner. Restaurant suggestions are provided and reservations are recommended for groups.*

## DAY THREE

The purpose of this day is to provide further exploration into the actual process of sharing, repurposing, and rebuilding church property for future ministry and to give the speakers and the case study panel an opportunity to respond to the attendees. The sessions will include a message from me about my research, two more breakout presentation opportunities, an exploration hour, the case study panel review, and final answers from our guest speakers.

### Session 6

This session will begin at 9:00am **Saturday morning** for all attendees. It will consist of a 45 minutes presentation from me about the motivation, process, and implications of my research followed by 15 minutes of question and answer afterward. I will begin by sharing my observations and conversations as a pastor regarding church property. The primary point from this will be to highlight the trend of church membership aging and shrinking, giving declining, and expenses increasing as buildings age. Then I will share about my research process and my methodology for identifying and interviewing pastors and church leaders who are responding to this trend in creative ways. Last, I will share the implications of my research for the church of the future. This piece will not focus on the three tracks as creative solutions, as that will have been addressed earlier. Rather, I will share both my learnings about church, culture, and future from the doctoral program with Len Sweet and address the macro-level concerns for the church and what the future could look like, dependent upon how we respond. Then I will conclude this session with a brief question and answer period.

*After time for questions and answers, the attendees will have a fifteen-minute stretch, coffee, and email break to transition into their second breakout session.*

Session 7 (Second Breakout)

These breakout presentations will follow the format outlined under Session 4 above. The schedule will be:

Sharing Real Estate Presenters:

Rev. Neal Sharpe (Room 1) and Revs. Anji and Andy Woodworth (Room 2)

Sacred Repurposing Presenters:

Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow (Room 3) and Rev. Pat Simpson (Room 4)

Strategic Rebuild Presenters:

Rev. Audrey Warren (Room 5) and Keith Cox (Room 6)

Exploration Hour

After the breakout session, participants will be offered an opportunity to further explore factors involved in decision making around creative use of church property. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage attendees to hone in on specific concerns, ideas, and potential stakeholders. There will be three options offered during the exploratory hour. Each attendee will be asked to register for their desired exploration opportunity in advance in order to facilitate the best possible experience, such as coordination with conference leadership.

Exploration A:

This exploration will be targeted toward attendees who would like to address consideration of denominational leadership as stakeholders. The hour will be a video conference call with United Methodist Conference Development Directors, Treasurers, and/or Trustees. The call will be hosted by Keith Cox of the North Georgia Conference and Dan Jackson of the Florida Conference. They along with other conference leadership on the call will share the factors that influence their visions and decisions regarding church property. There will also be time for questions from the attendees. This time of exploration will be helpful for both attendees and conference leadership to connect over ideas and opportunities.

Exploration B:

This exploration will be targeted toward attendees who would like to address consideration of civic leadership as stakeholders. The hour will consist of a walking tour of downtown Chamblee, guided by staff from the City of Chamblee Development office. The staff will share with attendees the strategic plans for city development along with the factors involved. They will also speak directly to where they see non-profit and faith-based organizations having impact and contribution. The purpose of this exploration is to give attendees an opportunity to address with civic leaders how the use of church property impacts its community as well as how the church can take into consideration the needs and plans of the community in its property use decisions.

Exploration C:

This exploration will be a roundtable discussion for attendees to gather and discuss specifically one of the three tracks outlined in the conference, Sharing Real

Estate, Sacred Repurposing, or Strategic Rebuilding. Tables will be made up of four persons or less and the discussion will be dedicated to the particular track indicated on the tabletop. Attendees will be encouraged to sit at the table that best suits their current thinking and share how they see that track being the best option for their context. The purpose of this exploration is to allow attendees to process with one another the factors, concerns, and ideas shaping their thinking. As they flesh these things out together, they will be able to learn, refine and contribute with one another.

*After the hour of exploration, all attendees will return to the main room to break for lunch. Prior to lunch, the two groups whose case study proposals were chosen by the panel for presentation will be announced and the groups will be asked to be ready to share their ideas with the panel after the third breakout session.*

LUNCH

The lunch break will last one hour. A variety of boxed lunches will be provided from a local deli and attendees will be offered the opportunity to eat with one of the presenters in designated rooms and areas. Each presenter will host an informal group conversation around their own perspective and experience as it relates to how a church utilizes property for ministry.

Session 8 (Third Breakout)

These breakout presentations will follow the format outlined under Session 4 above. The schedule of presenters for the third breakout session will be:

Sharing Real Estate Presenters:

Revs. Anji and Andy Woodworth (Room 1) and Rev. Mitchell Boone (Room 2)

Sacred Repurposing Presenters:

Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow (Room 3) and Rev. Derek Porter (Room 4)

Strategic Rebuild Presenters:

Keith Cox (Room 5) and Rev. Jasmine Smothers (Room 6)

*After the third breakout session, attendees will have a 15-minute stretch, coffee, and email break before returning to the main room for the case study proposal presentations.*

Session 9

This session will consist of the case study presentations made by the two groups chosen by the stakeholder panel of Chamblee Methodist. The six-person panel will include these persons: a teenager who is the president of the church youth group, a young parent with two children in the church preschool, the chair of the board of the church, a retired, life-long church member and leader, a local city councilperson, and a member of the homeowners association board of the neighborhood that shares a drive with the church.

The proposals will have been read by the panel as part of the selection process. Each group will have 10 minutes to present their proposal to the panel and then 10 minutes to answer questions from the panel. The purpose of this exercise is to allow the participating attendees to hear the reactions, thoughts, and concerns of church and community members related to creative ideas about what to do with the church property. The spirit of the exercise will be fun-hearted as the group members get to live out the process in real-time in front of the fellow attendees. After the presentations, the attendees will thank the panel and the groups for their effort in the case study exercise.

*A short 5-minute break will be taken to allow the panel to leave and groups to return to their seats.*

Session 10

Each participant will be encouraged to take 30 minutes at their seats to synthesize everything they have heard, learned, and thought into a three step action plan for when they return to their context. The process will be guided. Factors that participants will be encouraged to consider will be things like theological vision, asset inventory, and stakeholder identification. They will be encouraged to consider the vision for the use of their church property and what kind of theological factors or biblical imagery could be their guide. They will be encouraged to consider an inventory of the property of the church including land, buildings, and other improvements such as parking, playgrounds, cemeteries, ancillary structures, as well as neighboring facilities. They will also be encouraged to make a list of stakeholders with whom they would need to have conversation. Which stakeholders will be involved in the discernment process and why? Which stakeholders will need to give approval or be in agreement with a process and plan? The result of this 30 minute exercise will be a three step plan, including a timeline, that can be acted upon beginning Monday.

Session 11

The last session of the conference will be 30-45 minutes when each speaker will answer a question of their choosing from the list of questions submitted by participants during the conference via the provided form referenced above. This will give each speaker an

opportunity to share a parting thought to the entire conference while addressing the concerns of the participants.

Dismissal

*After the final words from the speakers, the participants will be dismissed. They will be directed to the conference website for a list of resources related to the topic, based on my research, as well as links to organizations that can help them further flesh out their ideas and support their efforts in all three of the tracks.*

## OPTIONAL DAY FOUR

For the participants who would like to stay for Sunday, they will be reminded that they are invited to worship at any of the three churches who hosted site visits on Day One or at the host church, Chamblee Methodist.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

**Books:**

When Not to Build: An Architect's Unconventional Wisdom for the Growing Church
By Ray Bowman and Eddy Hall

Why Church Buildings Matter: The Story of Your Space
By Tim Cool

Retired, Rehabbed, Reborn: The Adaptive Reuse of America's Derelict Religious Buildings and Schools
By Robert Simmons and Gary DeWine

**Organizations:**

Link2Lift
Partners with non-profit organizations, including churches, to re-envision and leverage underutilized space for ministry.

National Church Residences
Partners with churches nationwide to provide affordable housing for senior adults.

Neil Moseley (Presenter), The Church Cartographers, neil.moseley@icloud.com
Coaches pastors and churches to develop property use and re-use strategies

Ted McMullen (Presenter), Covington Investments, LLC, ted.mcmullen@covington.net
Consults and partners with southeastern churches on redevelopment of property

**Presenters:**

Rev. Mitchell Boone, Pastor of White Rock UMC, Dallas, TX

Keith Cox, Treasurer for North Georgia Conference UMC, Atlanta, GA

Rev. Dan Jackson, Former Church Development Director
Florida Conference UMC, Lakeland, FL

Ted McMullen, Real Estate Developer, Atlanta, GA

Rev. Derek Porter, Pastor of Smyrna First UMC, Atlanta, GA

Rev. Neal Sharpe, Pastor of Ravenna Collaboratory, Seattle, WA
Asset Specialist, Pacific Northwest Conference UMC

Rev. Pat Simpson, Former Pastor of U-Temple UMC, Seattle, WA
Trustee, Pacific Northwest Conference UMC

Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow, Pastor of Los Angeles First UMC, Los Angeles, CA

Rev. Jasmine Smothers, Pastor of Atlanta First UMC, Atlanta, GA

Rev. Audrey Warren, Pastor
Miami First UMC, Miami, FL

Revs. Anji and Andy Woodworth, Co-Pastors
Neighborhood Church, Atlanta, GA

# SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

Conversations with colleagues over the past fifteen years and interviews conducted for this work revealed many different factors affecting the discernment and decision making process for churches trying to address their disconnect with their community, their shrinking congregations, and their increased property costs. Listening to colleagues lament about the rising cost of constructing and maintaining church buildings, while observing the same in churches where I had served, prompted the idea for this work and the artifact as its culmination.

## Development

Church leaders and pastors can benefit greatly from seeing and hearing the experiences of colleagues who have been there. Given the dynamic nature of the problem and the variety of circumstances, contexts, and ideas, it became clear that an artifact providing access to experience and the opportunity for real-time interaction would be of the most benefit to readers and participants.

Consideration was given to options for engagement and education like an interactive website cataloguing sample churches or a book providing detailed accounts of the sample churches. Neither of these options provided the opportunity for engagement in the moment with colleagues and to push and pull with the sample churches. A book or a website is a static offering, like a snapshot in time of a topic that is rapidly developing both in terms of the problem and the solutions. The desired outcome of this work is to provide church leaders and pastors with ideas and inspiration to deal with the problem in a healthy and holy way. In order to do so, the artifact would need to be something that

supplies information along with opportunities for discussion and experimentation. The *BUILDING. FUTURE. CHURCH. Conference* is the result of an effort to create a live, participatory artifact that captures the imagination of the participants and provides them a chance to explore and iterate while learning and being encouraged together.

## Discovery

Faced with the frequency and enormity of the problem, I set out into my research with the idea that the church would be better served to get out of the real estate business altogether. The costs associated with construction and maintenance are becoming a greater and greater drain on resources for ministry. All the churches interviewed for this work indicated in some way the value of having a physical presence in a community and so my work turned from how to get churches out of owning property toward a development of a theology of place and space that would fund and facilitate ministry rather than stifle it.

With an eye toward maintaining a ministry-fueling physical presence, I saw themes of meeting the needs of the community and of risk-taking innovation emerge among both the sample churches and the scholarly works. I discovered that churches looked first to understand the nature of their physical presence in terms of biblical themes and then looked to see where their assets intersected with the needs of their neighbors. I also discovered that attending to the needs of the members of the congregation generally took a back seat or at least a beside seat to the needs of the neighbors. Giving pastors and church leaders space and structure within which to discuss and discern a process for identifying biblical purpose, community needs, and opportunities for innovation was another guiding motivation for the development of a conference.

The diversity of the churches and leaders brought forward in my research and in my artifact is an area for further development. Identifying additional BIPOC persons will better represent the diversity of our church and denomination. It will also give a broader perspective on all the opportunities and approaches currently being explored. Another avenue for exploration is the work of Edward T. Hall and Joe Myers around the organization and use of space as it relates to culture, known as proxemics. Addressing the sociological considerations of space development and use will further enhance the artifact. Lastly, further development of the sacred nature of space will strengthen the theological aspect of the artifact. Walter Brueggemann's treatment of the difference between space and place is an additional resource in this direction.

The conference is designed to be a learning and iterative experience, both for participants and leaders. The process of developing this type of artifact has brought to light for me the importance of collaboration and experimentation. The artifact will be successful if we all come away with ideas and inspiration to consider the subject in new ways and a willingness to explore new possibilities.

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