



BUZZ DURHAM

# The new mission field

Creative ways to use your church property

BY SUE WASHBURN

Leaders at First Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, had a difficult decision to make. The congregation had existed on a downtown block for more than 200 years. It has had three sanctuaries on the site and the graveyard has tombs for signers of the United States Constitution. Numerically, the historic congregation was holding steady, but its most recent building was old and in decline. Should members invest in costly renovations so that the building could be used for 21st-century ministry? Or should the congregation move to a more modern space closer to where the members live?

These questions are not unique to FPC Knoxville. As congregations

change and traditional church buildings age, the question of what to do about buildings and property becomes paramount. At one end of the continuum, older congregations wonder if they should continue allowing the building to provide a sanctuary for the members who had sustained it. At the other end, new church development leaders must decide whether to commit to bricks and mortar or continue renting space even though the weekly setup and cleanup can siphon off energy that could be used in other ways.

There is no single right answer when it comes to making building choices. The best property for a congregation is one that helps them to follow God's call.

Dr. Paul K. Hooker, associate dean for ministerial formation and advanced studies at Austin Theological Seminary, says that the first question to ask when thinking about buildings and property is "What is our mission?" The follow-up question is "How can our property help or hinder us with that mission?"

"The mission of Christ is different from one place to another; so also is the need for, use of, and value of buildings and property. Over time, a community of God's people may well come to differing conclusions about the spaces in which it lives and works," Hooker said. "What any community must bear in mind is that a building or other property is almost always a gift from the community's

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina, is the congregation known for its big garden on the front lawn of its church. The vegetables are donated to local food pantries.

past and a bequest to its future. What to do about buildings and properties is almost always best done if we understand ourselves as stewards on behalf of both the community and Christ, rather than as owners.”

**The concept of space**

The theology of space is influenced by culture as well. While it’s impossible to paint all people of a generation with one brushstroke, there are big-picture differences in how baby boomers and millennials approach the concept of place. For many older adults, physical space is important. Jobs were done at specific desks in offices, hymns were printed in books, and post-World War II mortgage incentives meant houses and churches were desired symbols of security and prosperity.

However, place and property are different in millennials’ lives. They have come of age in a world where jobs are done on computers from home or a coffee shop, hymns are stored digitally then projected, and home ownership numbers are dropping as the number of houses being rented is increasing. Having church without owning a building makes sense if Bibles are on phones and hymns can be shown on a blank wall.

As the congregation of FPC Knoxville discerned what God was calling them to do, they realized that the church building was a busy place, serving more nonmembers than members. The building was a way of showing Christ’s love to neighbors, even if it was outdated.

“We were an old, downtown church building. Everything had lived beyond its time — plumbing, heating and air conditioning. We didn’t even have a single ADA-accessible bathroom. And yet, a theater group holds its rehearsals here, adults from a local group home use the facility for education and training for people with special needs, and a musical group uses the space. That’s

in addition to the graveyard, which is a magnet for people, especially at Halloween,” said the Rev. Dr. William Pender, senior pastor.

FPC had an opportunity to move to the suburbs, but felt that there was more ministry to do where they were. The decision to stay, though, required a lot of thought and prayer.

“We experienced some fear about making the decision. We could easily make the argument that there are other justice and mercy issues that need to be addressed, but we felt God calling us to be a ministry of witness and presence right where we have always been,” Pender said.

**Without a building**

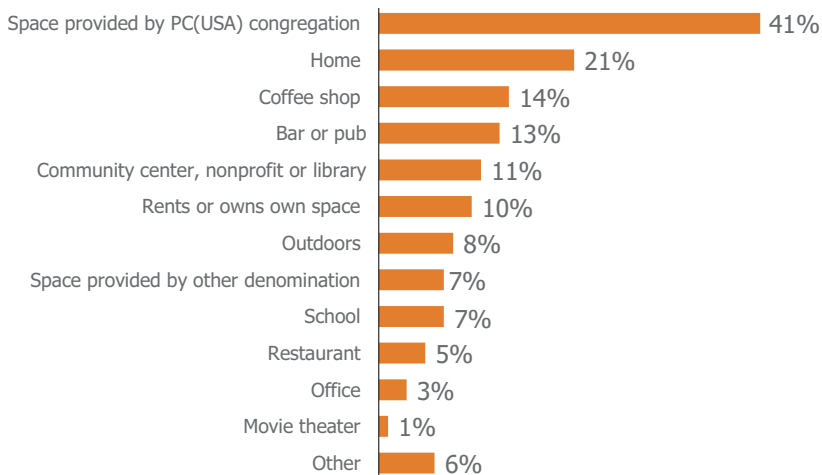
New congregations today often begin without their own building. They nest in an existing church, travel from home to home or rent space for worship. The Open Door in Pittsburgh is a congregation that has never owned its own church building in more than 12 years of ministry. It began in the basement of an established church and has since worshipped in three different spaces.

The Rev. John Creasy says this has helped them realize that

following Jesus is about being a good community partner as well as engaging in faithful worship. A traditional building does not have to be part of that.

“It’s ridiculous to think we need to pay for a big building that we sit in once a week for an hour or two,” he said. “We should make sure the building is vital, being used throughout the week. Some churches have enough programs to do that in and of themselves. But for those who don’t, partnership can connect the congregation to the community. Not to share our buildings is selfish and sinful.”

The South Carolina-based Chapel of Hope in Hanson Circle meets in a government-subsidized apartment building rather than a church building. Many members of the congregation are on a limited income, sometimes having to choose between purchasing medication and buying food. The Rev. Herb Codington says that not having to worry about a building drops the cost of ministry significantly. He finds an apt metaphor for thinking about buildings and property in Jesus’ teaching about pouring new wine into old wineskins.



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“The flexible wineskin is a metaphor that needs to be visited and revisited for our mission and our church,” Codington said. “The structures we use should be used for hospitality.”

Codington also serves other congregations as well, one of which turned its building into a food pantry and another that is converting unused classroom space into rooms for a homeless shelter.

### Owning a building

The Revs. James B. and Renée Notkin co-pastor Union Church in Seattle, which is on some of the most expensive real estate in the United States. After renting space for more than four years, the young congregation decided to buy the building in which they were worshipping, despite the cost. The Union Church building is more than a once-a-week sanctuary. Located in the heart of the Amazon complex, the building is also a coffee and chocolate shop as well as a rentable venue for weddings, events and meetings. Union Church has had the support of University Presbyterian Church of Seattle and other congregations.

James is quick to point out, however, that they don’t sell coffee during the week to pay the pricey mortgage, but because it’s what God is calling them to do. Renée adds that they feel called to be a blessing in that neighborhood.

“We are right in the middle of Amazon-land. We are intentionally a space where people can pause and engage with each other. We are a respite for a community that has people in front of computers all day and spend their time feeling isolated,” she said.

Having wrestled with building and mission questions, the Notkins suggest that congregations ask how they might reinvent themselves as part of their community. Even established congregations can find new purposes for their buildings if



JEFFREY A. VAMOS

The Community Well at the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, is a place where people can seek health and wholeness — together. Here, medical kits are assembled for a mission project.

they understand what the community needs. Renée suggests that all church leaders do what church planters do.

“Hang out where people are. Show up at school events and figure out what is missing in your neighborhood,” she said. “Too often we either have public space or private space, but the church can occupy a middle ground. The church building is owned by people who care about the welfare of the neighborhood.”

### Churchyards as mission fields

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina, used to be known as the church next to McDonald’s.

Today it’s known as the church next to the big garden. Grace Covenant discovered churches are more than buildings. Yards and graveyards can be part of Christ’s mission, too.

Eight years ago, the leaders of Grace Covenant decided to plow their front yard to grow food. The congregation sent out a note to the people who lived around the church and invited them to come to a potluck to talk about the garden. Today the garden is maintained by both members and nonmembers.

Garden coordinator Buzz Durham said the individual plots aren’t rented. Every year, the group gathers to collectively decide what to plant. Durham says the garden is about loving the people in the neighborhood rather than getting people in the pews.

“Many churches spend an enormous amount of money and energy on the one great hour of worship,” Durham said. “But the number one rule is that we have to walk the talk of faith. That goes back to the simple call we got from Jesus to love our neighbor and look after the people on the margins. That’s the criteria we should use for thinking about property.”

Durham said gardening, like ministry, is all about taking risks. For Grace Covenant, it was a risk that paid off as the community donated more than 8,000 pounds of fresh produce to local organizations chosen by the gardeners in 2017.

While Pittsburgh’s Open Door congregation doesn’t own a church, it does own a building and property — a greenhouse and three acres of land that is used for Garfield Community Farm, a ministry it never could have afforded if they had built or

purchased a traditional building for worship.

“One of the things that drove us to start the farm was the recognition of the abandoned land and the abandoned people in the neighborhood. The buildings were unoccupied or torn down,” Creasy said. “Yet, when I think of sacred space, I think of something beautiful where I can encounter God. That’s not what we had at the beginning of the farm. But it has been transformed because of the thousands of pounds of compost and the participation of people in the community.”

The farm has been a hands-on lesson in experiencing God’s restoration, a lesson that might have been missed if the congregation had invested in a traditional building.

### **New uses for existing space**

When members of the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, were creating a strategic plan for ministry and stewardship, they felt drawn to emulate Christ’s ministry of wellness to a hurting community. The congregation created The Community Well, a place where people can seek health and wholeness in mind, body and spirit, and find a sense of purpose by connecting with others.

The congregation was founded in a meetinghouse in 1698. People have sung praises, pondered God’s word and cared for one another in that spot since then. Times changed and so did the ministries. Buildings have been torn down and added, renovated

and upgraded to serve the various missions of the congregation over time. Today, The Community Well offers yoga and healthy eating classes as well as classes for seniors, meditation, family counseling, spiritual direction and mental health services.

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Vamos, pastor at the church, says that even though the congregation is full of vitality, it’s partnerships that allow The Community Well to offer such a large variety of services. The Community Well has teachers, leaders and counselors who rent space to provide their services, creating both revenue and inspiration for the congregation.

“We decided to leverage the resources that we have,” Vamos said. “That includes the building, our people and the social network of the congregation. We are turning the liability of empty space into a benefit for the congregation.”

While the church had enough space for wellness programs, the congregation still had to invest in changes to make space usable for the different groups.

For example, classes for seniors needed large flat screens that the instructors could use to show images and videos, and some of the Sunday school rooms had to be flexible enough to be used as comfortable, intimate spaces for counseling. Volunteer labor from the congregation helped to offset some of the cost of the improvements, Vamos said.

Like the community wells in the

Bible, The Community Well in the church is bringing together the people of Lawrenceville. Not all of the programming is overtly religious, but the mission is Jesus-centered. Vamos says Jesus gave people’s lives purpose when he called them, taught them or healed them, in a community setting.

“I see God working in the relationships that happen when we start taking risks with other professionals and practitioners in the community,” he said. “We are not in the business of maintaining endowments and buildings, but making disciples. We are doing what Jesus did — meeting people where they are and offering them a change for wellness.”

As congregations seek to be faithful in changing times, the ways they build ministry and mission will change. But Hooker says some things about being Christ’s church remain the same.

“Throughout its long history, the church has made sacred a variety of spaces, from catacombs to cathedrals,” he said. “It is true that these spaces are sometimes costly and — in an ultimate sense — impermanent. But it is also true that they serve a psychological and spiritual function to prepare us for an encounter with the divine. What makes the space sacred is its regular use by the body of Christ.”

*Sue Washburn is the pastor of Reunion Presbyterian Church in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, a retreat leader and a freelance communicator.*

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