

IS IS TIME TO RELOCATE?

Typically the question of whether to relocate is precipitated by a building crisis. The roof leaks, the high steps to the sanctuary render it inaccessible without an elevator, or basement fumes have become too noxious to ignore. Repairs may be too costly or time-consuming. Is it time to relocate?

Mission First, Building Second

The church building serves the congregation's mission and not the other way around. Any decision to leave or stay must focus on mission first, building second. This can be done by gathering a team that will address fundamental questions: Who are we as a congregation? (identity), Who are our neighbors? (demographics), and Who is God calling us to be? (mission). It's never simply about the building.

Identity, or the congregation's unique sense of self, is determined by many things, from its history to how it worships, governs itself, or educates members. How does the building shape the congregation's identity for better or worse? Practice listening to the building. Ask "What about our facility leads people to deeper practices of faith?" and "What about our facility drives everyone crazy?" Interview individuals to get their experience of the space, convene a small group to tell stories with the facility as the main character, or take a building tour together.

Demographics, or the characteristics of the population nearby, are another important part of the discernment process and can be gathered by using tools provided by Mission Insite (<https://missioninsite.com/>), a nonprofit that helps congregations reach their communities. Three types of information are especially relevant: 1) who lives in the geographic area that the congregation is especially interested in reaching, 2) community trends, and 3) church members themselves. While too much data can be overwhelming, its usefulness lies in providing a "reality check" to decision-makers.

Mission, or what God is calling the church to be, should drive decisions about building use. Otherwise,

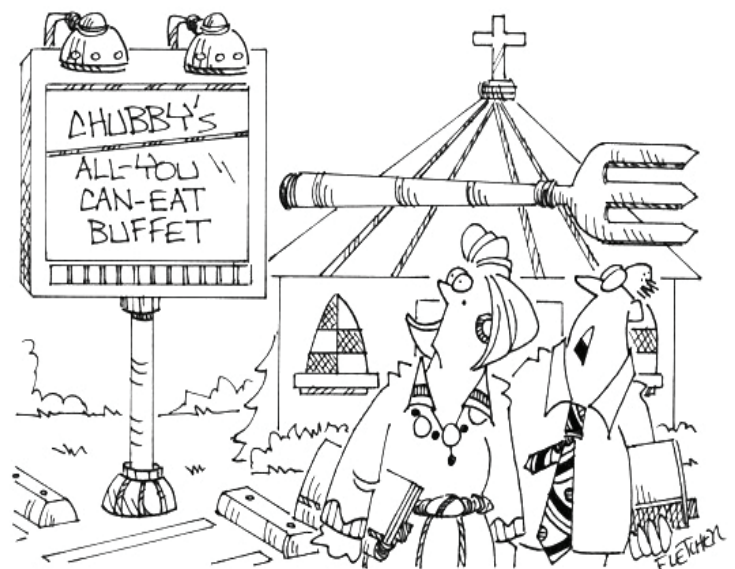
the congregation may focus on routine maintenance issues rather than the big stuff. For this part, the governing board must be part of the conversation. Start with the congregation's **values** (what it considers important to think and do) by listing, defining, and prioritizing at least five of them. These values shape the **mission statement**, which addresses what the congregation is passionate about, what it can do best compared with other congregations, and its overarching reason for existing. Finally, develop a **vision statement**, "a word picture of what our congregation would look like if we were, in fact, able to fulfill our mission statement."¹

Decision Time

The time has come. The decision to relocate has been made. What are the options going forward?

Rent

Renting has many positive advantages. Long favored by church planters due to its flexibility, renting allows the



"WHEN WE FINALLY REMOVE THE OLD SIGN,
WE CAN EXPECT A SUBSTANTIAL DROP
IN SUNDAY ATTENDANCE."

option to terminate if the arrangement does not work out, and money saved on building maintenance can be used for ministry. However, renting can be expensive, and landlords typically have the upper hand in determining the terms of the agreement.² Is space sharing an option? Church Space in Houston makes property available for rent by churches at affordable rates. Whereas a hotel might charge between \$700 and \$1,000 weekly, the organization charges \$450 for Sunday and weekday slot combined. Day Edwards, the CEO, calls it a “co-churching,” comparing it to car or house sharing. She buys a property, renovates it for church use, equipping it with soft lighting, piano, organ, and audio and streaming equipment, and then rents it to three churches at a single location. “It’s church in a box. You come, you church, you leave.”³

Build

Building can be expensive, approximately \$120 to \$150 per square foot for the church facility alone (minus grounds and parking lot).⁴ It also takes work to find the right property, have it appraised, gather financial information in order to secure funding, and perhaps organize a capital campaign. Yet creativity can flourish, and the project can be shaped to reflect the congregation’s deeply held values. When Keystone Community Church in Ada, Michigan opened a second campus for its 1,300 members, they designed it for ecological sustainability. To limit disturbance to the thirty-five-acre site of rolling hills, heavy woods, meadow, and wetlands, they located the 500-seat auditorium along the tree line, placed the parking lot on the existing meadow, and built bioswales (channels lined with heavy vegetation) to channel the possibly polluted storm water runoff from the parking lot. The café and gathering area have a central skylight and large areas of clear glass to provide ample natural light. With recycled building materials, bricks bought locally, low flow water faucets, waterless urinals, a high-efficiency HVAC system, and a total cost of \$3 million, this is a model green church.⁵

Adapt

Adapting involves buying a vacant building that had been used for non-religious purpose and giving it a makeover. Less expensive than new construction, it requires resourcefulness and imagination. Some churches choose to leave the exterior and the building’s footprint intact, stripping the interior down to its basic walls and roof. Sociologists Robert Brenneman

and Brian Miller studied congregations that chose this route. They found that, while rarely the first choice of leaders, the low cost and convenience was a big advantage. In 2012, Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois bought a building that was formerly a manufacturing plant and gutted one portion to develop a sanctuary that seats over nine hundred people. With a massive stage up front, risers in the back, and a window running the whole length of one side, the new sanctuary felt like the high school gym they had inhabited for the past dozen years, yet it gave them room to grow. On a tour of the building, an associate pastor emphasizes that the building in its original manufacturing role gave glory to God, explaining, “Matter matters.” One-third of the building is still unrenovated.⁶

A Long Tradition of Change

Church buildings have been adapted, rebuilt, and abandoned with regularity throughout history. Early Christians used member’s houses for a private and intimate worship experience. The fourth century church signaled its respectability by building magnificent buildings that resembled a basilica or Roman law court. Eastern Orthodox churches innovated by placing a dome over this square structure using new technology. While Medieval leaders gave special meaning to every aspect of the worship space, Protestant Reformers stripped it of ornament and enlarged the gathering area. In some ways the current popularity of low-profile buildings, accessibility, and flexible seating bears a closer resemblance to the house churches of the early church era than did the monumental type buildings of a century ago.⁷

1. Nancy DeMott, Tim Shapiro, and Brent Bill, *Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 9-57.

2. Mike Boblit, “Renting Versus Buying Your Church’s Facility,” *Church Law and Tax*. <https://www.churchlawandtax.com/blog/2016/july/renting-versus-buying-your-churchs-facility.html>.

3. Sandra Larson, “Making Space for Worship in the 21st Century,” December 14, 2018. Next City. <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/making-space-for-worship-in-the-21st-century>.

4. The McKnight Group, <https://www.mcknightgroup.com/>.

5. Mark A. Torgerson, *Greening Spaces for Worship and Ministry* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2012), 86-88, 115-118, 141, 145, 183.

6. Robert Brenneman and Brian Miller, *Building Faith: A Sociology of Religious Structures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 136-141.

7. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship, Third Edition Revised and Expanded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 91-103, 100.