

The glory of repurposing space

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Much of the tension in the second season of *Downton Abbey* has to do with the fact that the great house has been turned into a respite care center for army officers. This novel use of the space, coupled with so many new people about, provides a wonderfully entertaining storyline. In a weird way, it's spurred me to reflect on the use of space for faith-related practices.

When church leaders repurpose space, good things often follow.

I think of [Broad Street Ministry](#) in Philadelphia that holds worship in a gorgeous old church, but one in which all pews have been removed. The hodgepodge of chairs can be arranged in any which way—it's hard to find two chairs alike—and the space can easily welcome art installations, shows, and theater. Worshipping in that sanctuary necessarily gets one thinking about the edginess of the gospel, and the way God pushes our boundaries. Each service concludes when tables are set up in the middle of the sanctuary and all join in a meal.

I think of the Theology Pubs which [The Project F-M](#) holds in a basement of a local bar/restaurant. We gather to talk about faith and theology, but the setting and the beverages communicate that our conversations can be real, open, and free in a way many church meeting rooms aren't. People who wouldn't think of going to church come happily. Pastors who work all day at a church, embrace the change of scene.

I think of the Easter Vigil held at [St. John's Lutheran Church](#) in Atlanta. During the service, worshipers actually journey from sanctuary to fellowship hall and to several other areas of the campus. Near the end of the service, all the worshipers gather outside the sanctuary behind its thick closed doors. About midnight the pastor exclaims, "Christ is risen," and bangs on the doors of the church with a huge brick. They spring open. The organ, at full blast, plays celebratory music and the worshipers rush to the communion table—yes, Lutherans run to the the communion table. All gather round the table to join singing "Alleluia" and dance a circle dance.

The Eucharist is celebrated. Then, out of nowhere, the same Eucharistic table is set with a feast of cookies, fresh fruit, coffee, champagne (if I remember right), and chocolates.

Surely there are more examples: when church gyms become homeless shelters, when sunday school rooms are transformed into free clinics, when office break rooms become prayer stations.

Repurposing space takes time, openness, and a willingness to fail. I wish it happened more often because, when it does, we often catch a glimpse of what God is up to.

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