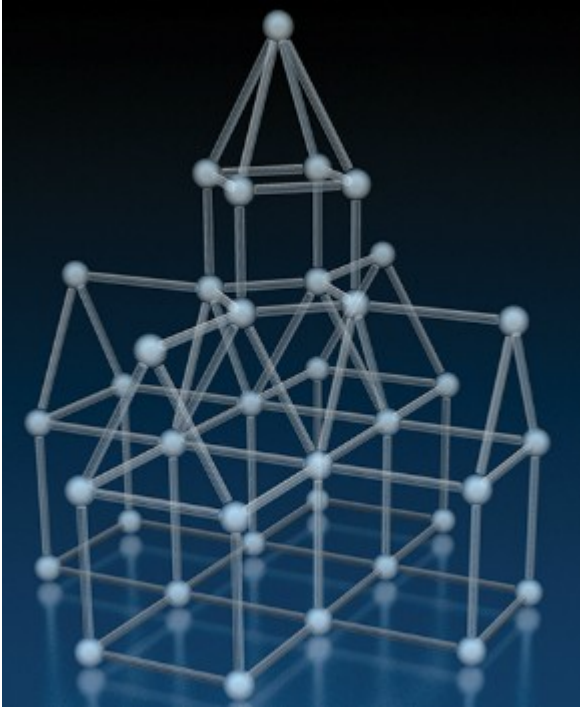


## Asset management: How a building can serve a church's mission

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Many congregations regard their church property as an albatross—a huge maintenance burden. They tend to see church largely as a Sunday operation that takes place on a property that needs tedious and expensive maintenance during the rest of the week. But in our ministries in different churches over the years, each of us has discovered the importance of viewing buildings and real estate as assets.

What we've discovered—and it has been a learning curve for us, as well as for the congregations we've served—is that buildings and grounds can be leveraged to support congregational mission and extend the presence of the church in the community.

One issue many churches need to think about is the possibility of renting space in their buildings, and how to go about doing this. One common assumption is that allowing other groups to use the building is a form of evangelism—community

members who use the space will be more likely to attend worship. In our experience sharing space in this way seldom leads to an increase in worship attendance.

Another assumption is that renting space is a form of benevolence. But this approach often leads congregations to help people who do not need help or enables groups to take advantage of a church's naïveté.

This reality became evident to us in one of our pastorates. The church had rented rooms to a franchised math tutoring program. The church had determined a rental fee, but kept it low under the assumption that the church was supporting children's education. Soon it became clear that the church had underestimated how lucrative this tutoring program was and how much the church was adding to the profits of a for-profit organization. Church leaders met again, researched the business, and set a more appropriate rent.

When the rental to the tutoring organization ended, leaders brainstormed: What other programs might use the available space for a fair rental fee?

At one church, when leaders explored possible uses of the property they learned that there was a need for after-school care for middle schoolers. The church decided that it had space to devote to this project and that such a program fit well with the church's mission.

The church started a drop-in center that included homework tutoring, a computer lab, and supervised sports and games. The center was open to students of any or no religion, but the program was unapologetically Christian. It promoted cooperative learning, team-building games, and service to others, based on Jesus' teachings. Plus it offered a mix of intellectual, athletic, and social programs. The church hired seminary students and graduates as staff and recruited church youth as homework tutors. The church's youth minister served as director.

The program opened with 14 students and was subsidized by the church for two years. Now it has over 40 students and generates enough revenue to cover all its expenses and subsidize the youth ministry budget. The center reaches new families in the community and has enhanced the church's reputation as a church with a great youth program.

It's important to note that from the beginning the congregation had a business plan that called for students' families to finance the costs. The church had discovered

that there was a big difference between renting to a program it endorsed but didn't control and creating a program in its space that was part of both the church's budget and its mission.

Another church had a large building in the middle of town. With 300 members, many of whom were retired, the church budget was strained by the needs of the building. The age of the congregation and its heavy dependence on investment income to maintain the building had led to desperation. Gloomy scenarios were often the topic of conversation.

The congregation made the effort to imagine how the building could be an asset instead of a drain. It decided to open a thrift shop in an old parlor. The shop took donations and consignment items and would aid those who needed goods at low prices and, it was hoped, generate income. In the first year the thrift shop earned \$30,000 and is projected to take in \$50,000 the next.

In addition to providing this welcome revenue, the shop fulfilled another part of its mission statement: it helped victims of fire, flood, or other disasters by providing free clothing and household items.

The thrift shop ministry led to an outpouring of volunteers from the church who were delighted to be doing something concrete to help the church and the community at the same time. Instead of seeing their building as a burden, this congregation now sees it as a tool for mission.

Once we shift from thinking of property as a problem to recognizing its potential, we may find new ways to balance budgets and live out our mission. The approach can also help unite energies in the congregation: those who pour over financial statements and those committed to outreach can combine their efforts.

Congregations can learn to be more intentional about how their properties are used. Instead of being apologetic about their space, they should resist the temptation to undervalue or even give away their real estate. When they do this, they may discover that they have a treasure buried in their walls.