

When doing church differently means doing it the same

by [Christian Coon](#)

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When a friend and I started planting a new church in Chicago about five years ago, we had lots of ideas about how to do church. But one thing was certain: we wanted to do church differently. Lots of church planters have the same mission. We talked (and still talk) about wanting to reach people who were unsure of church, had been burned by church, were bored of church, never wanted to have anything to do with church.

We told existing churches that we weren't in competition with them—we wanted to attract people who, for whatever reason, would never set foot in a narthex. In other words, we didn't want our church to be too...churchy.

We followed that pattern for our first worship site for the congregation we started, Urban Village Church. We worshiped in a theater at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies downtown—a location that engendered a fair amount of great conversation. And it wasn't churchy.

We've launched additional sites in different venues since then, including a retirement facility and a theater. But we recently made the decision to move our downtown site from the Spertus Institute to an existing church. It wasn't an easy decision. But it was expensive to worship in a nice space in downtown Chicago, and as we launched other worship sites, our original downtown site decreased in size—making the theater at the Spertus Institute too big. Our hope was that going to a smaller space would actually enhance our chances for growth.

We also thought it would help to be in the midst of a more traditional downtown neighborhood. The Spertus Institute is across the street from [Grant Park](#), while St. Matthew United Methodist Church—in the same conference of the same denomination as our congregation—is 2.5 miles north. St. Matthew's worships at 12:30 p.m., which means its sanctuary was open during the time we worship. It seemed like a good arrangement.

But St. Matthew's is also a traditional United Methodist sanctuary. It has the pews, the paraments, the hymnals. Were we going against our original vision of not worshipping in traditional space?

I was pleased when, after the first service at St. Matthew's, a parishioner e-mailed me and noted, "though I'll miss the comfy seats at Spertus, the new space has a sense of intimacy that Spertus lacked. . . . it looks and feels more 'churchy.' I think that connections will form more easily at the new location." Yes, the new space is certainly churchy, but that may be a good thing.

Another surprise: There are folks who are fed spiritually by doing traditional church tasks that I thought no one would want to do. I confess that one of the things I've loved about worshipping in a neutral space is that I don't have to worry about the basement flooding or the boiler breaking down. I'm not a very handy guy, so I haven't missed this part of ministry from my previous pastorates. But after our first service in our new space, several people came up to me to offer to help our friends at St. Matthew's with building upkeep. One person couldn't wait to plant some flowers out front. Another was eager to pick up a paint brush.

One member, a 35-year-old dad, explained it to me this way: "I'm not one to sit in a small group and talk much. I feel like I live out my faith when I'm working side by side with someone else."

So a few Saturdays ago, a group of us gathered at St. Matthew's to plant, weed, dust, organize, and mow. Someone volunteered to bring the donuts and coffee. It turns out that doing church differently also means that we're engaging in practices that stand the test of time.