

What are we worshipping?

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A church not too far from where I live and work has closed. Its last worship service was held at the end of December. Everyone worried that the large, stately building in the middle of town would be left to languish, perhaps even torn down. But, then, rescuers showed up, purchasing the building with the intent of repurposing it, for weddings and events.

The few members that were left are happy that the church “will be preserved,” according to the local newspaper.

But, I’m wondering: What’s being preserved, exactly?

Don’t get me wrong. I’m a big fan of church buildings, and sanctuaries in particular. I love the sense of space, the invitation for meditation and reflection. But, at the same time, I find myself worrying that there are good church people, especially those in the declining mainline, who are a little too attached to the building, and forgetting the more important dimension of worship: God. What happens when God and the community of faith get replaced by a building?

At Old South, the church I serve, we are experimenting this winter, holding worship in the Parish House instead of the sanctuary. This experiment is driven by two factors:

1. The high cost of heating the sanctuary for worship and choir rehearsals during the coldest winter months. (As I write, it’s -6!)
2. The problems of having a church building on a steep hill, with limited access for those with mobility problems.

It gets icy and slippery at this time of year. Every winter it seems, at least one person slips and falls on their way into the church building. So, we are trying worship in the much more accessible, and easier to heat, Parish House.

When the oversight committee decided to make this change, a few people approached me to share their complaints and concerns. Most of the complaining

involved the sense that to worship in the Parish House was not really to worship at all, that the sanctuary was essential to worship. It's important to note that the complaints were brought by only a few, but worship attendance at our first worship service in the Parish House was down a bit. Are there people staying away because it's not worship if it's in the Parish House? I'm not sure, but it's possible.

There's a problem when good church people find themselves so closely attached to a church building, feeling that there can be no worship without a sanctuary. While I understand the sense of disruption in moving from one space to another (believe me, I found it more disorienting than I imagined to lead worship in the Parish House than in the sanctuary), it's also crucial that good church people take a moment to reflect and pray about what's at the center of that discomfort. Is it that it's just an unwelcome change or is that, all this time, they've actually been worshipping the building rather than God?

As we mainliners witness and experience our own difficult and painful decline, and watch church closings not at all far away, we must find the grace and courage to take stock of our selves, our own community, our own church, and to ask deep questions about why we are in church, and what motivates and inspires our commitment. Is it our devotion to the building or to our Savior? Does the wondrous sense of space in our sanctuary inspire fidelity just to itself or to the One to whom it is dedicated?

Are we worshipping a building or God? This is a question that must not be left unanswered. When a church closes and the building is "repurposed," we must know that only the building is being preserved, and not the church. There's a difference.

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