

In defense of the church building

By [E. Carrington Heath](#)

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It seems like every week I hear someone in the wider church say, “You know, the church is more than the building.”

This is often said in a rather condescending tone, with the sense that the speaker is delivering some novel piece of wisdom. It’s often followed with a line like, “I mean, Jesus never had a building.” Or, “Think of all the ministry we could do if we just sold our buildings and gave the money away!”

I always want to say, “Do you honestly think most Christians don’t know that?”

True, we are often a little too fond of our buildings. We are willing to wage million-dollar capital campaigns to fix aging structures while at the same time letting the associate pastor go for lack of funds. Or, we treat church buildings like our own homes, locking them up tightly, except for a few hours on a Sunday morning.

I have known of many churches like that. Churches that, frankly, do not deserve their buildings. Because if a church is using the building only for themselves, and if they have made it the modern equivalent of a golden calf, they really have little business calling themselves a church.

I know congregations hanging on with ten people in the pews on Sunday morning and another church just down the road. They pump their money into the building and wonder why no one ever comes.

You probably know of them too.

Please hear me; I am not talking about those churches. Those buildings could often see more ministry by being better used as housing for the homeless, offices for nonprofits, or meeting spaces for 12-step groups.

But I’m worried that in our quest to rid ourselves of buildings, we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We need to be in right relationship with our buildings.

They should be tools, not false idols.

I pastor a congregation with a beautiful, historic building from the late 1700s, one that inspires people to walk in off the street to explore it. While we value our history as a congregation, the members of my church have been adamant about this building being more than a clubhouse for ourselves. We have our Sunday services of course, all held in a sanctuary that is both beautiful and functional.

But we also open our doors to AA three times a week. We host community lectures and events. We open our columbarium for all who wish for their ashes to be buried. We grow vegetables in our community garden. And we host whiffle ball games out back in the summer and pass out candy from the big front doors on Halloween.

I will never willingly pastor a church that loves its building more than it loves Jesus, but I will always jump at the chance to serve where the people are willing to use every resource they have in creative ways to serve God and their communities. Including their building.

I don't believe that this is going against Jesus' will for the church. However, I do believe Jesus was pretty clear about the problem of using the house of God for the wrong purposes.

When the moneylenders set up shop outside the doors of the Temple, Jesus cared enough about the Temple to flip those tables over. The Temple, in and of itself, was not a bad place. What was happening in and around the Temple was what desecrated it.

And so, I take caution from that story. I know that a building is only as useful to the people of God as what we are using it for. If it becomes a place where we fulfill only our own needs, or on which we mistakenly focus our worship, then it is an albatross around the neck of our faith. We would do well to rid ourselves of it and look seriously inward.

But if we live in right relationship with our buildings, we can use them as incredible tools for ministry. We can use our buildings as signs that we are rooted and planted in our communities, and that we are not going anywhere. We are committed to our neighborhood because we are built into the neighborhood's own streets. And we exist not just in our towns but for our towns.

So look again at your church's building. And now visualize all the ways it can be used.

Could that same room that holds coffee hour on Sundays host 12-step meetings? Could the Sunday school rooms host after-school programs? Could the basement host free washing machines for those who can't afford them? Could the sanctuary double as a space for free lectures? And could that big piece of land out back be made into a community garden for the food pantry?

As Christians we are called to be good stewards of everything we have been given. Sometimes, that may mean to let go of it. But other times it just takes looking at all we have been given in a new way, and being open to use these tools for good.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*