

What will make us better humans?

**As I think about all of the complex questions we have ahead of us concerning downsizing, restructuring, property, and buildings, I've begun to have one guiding question.**

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I stepped into The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. I wanted to show my daughter the beauty of it all—the stained glass, the massive columns, and the Keith Haring Triptych. I had taken her as a child, but her memory of it was clouded.

When we arrived after our long journey, they charged us \$20 to get in. I gladly paid and had planned to donate at least that amount, but I knew that I would not have had such a positive reaction a few years ago. I had been to the church many times, as a modern pilgrim without any money, but with the burning need to be in a beautiful sanctuary that soared. I wanted to breathe in the scent of burning prayers. I could imagine my resentment at selling holy space.

Yet, I have been working with churches for a long time and I know the reality all too well. The buildings cost money to maintain, especially when they keep it open to the public on a regular basis. Most congregations struggle with an awkward dynamic—they want to focus on mission, but the building sucks up so much of the budget and most of their energy pours into maintenance. Even though churches take up some of the most expensive real estate in the country, they have a difficult time keeping the lights on. And, I am sure, that beautiful cathedral was no exception. I was a spiritual tourist, and I needed to do my part.

Though I was not angry, there was a hiccup of pain. When we began to move about in the nave, we were immediately asked to leave parts of the cathedral. Security guards with velvet ropes began to herd us into certain areas, so we didn't get to see the triptych. A tinge of protest formed in my belly, as I thought, *But I paid for this*. I felt like one of those bitter elders who doesn't get his way at a meeting and so he brings up all of the money that he has given over the years.

I knew that my relationship with the space had changed. I was no longer a guest, thankful to my generous host for creating and maintaining that beauty for 125 years. It became a transactional relationship, where I was charged for a sticker and so I expected certain things in return.

It made me think about the [consulting work](#) that I do with churches all over the country, and I wondered how we can faithfully shift. Many of us feel like elderly widows, knocking about in giant mansions. The rooms used to be full of people, but now we know that our families are smaller and we need to downsize. So how do we do it well? There are so many things to sort out. Is our building becoming a barrier to

our mission? Or can our property become an asset, and help us to further our ministries? Can we use our space in different ways, for instance, as an incubating space for new non-profits? Can we partner with an immigrant community?

As I think about our ministries, we have so many complex questions ahead of us concerning downsizing, restructuring, property, buildings, etc. As we sort it all out, I've found that the more complex the questions become, the more we need one guiding question. Mine has become: *What will make us better humans?*

It's easy for us to ask, "What will create the most money? What will keep us in business longer? How can we maintain this property?" But none of that matters if we're not becoming better, loving, compassionate humans. Our world is in a difficult place right now, and there's not much out there to inspire us. We have to keep tending to souls.

We know that even grand churches, filled with art and beauty, are in the midst of difficult times. So, it's important for us to keep nudging one another, whispering to each other in soaring architecture and in simple sanctuaries, reminding ourselves of our most important calling—to love deeply and to live abundant lives.