

From luxury stays to ‘champing,’ churches adopt pandemic-era Airbnb models

by [Kathryn Post](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



The Church of All Saints in Langport, Somerset, England, is a champing site. (Photo by Joseph Casey)

After the death of its founding pastor a few years ago, membership at Cullen Missionary Baptist Church in Houston took a nosedive.

André Jones, the current pastor, said that with fewer donations supporting the upkeep of a building equal in size to a city block, “we had more space than we knew what to do with and didn’t have the people or resources to pay for it.”

That’s when Cullen MBC turned to Church Space, a platform akin to Airbnb that allows houses of worship to rent their sanctuaries, fellowship halls, and kitchens to other congregations and organizations for as much as \$30,000 a year.

“Without Church Space, I don’t know if we would still be here,” said Jones. “Those funds and resources that came in have been lifesaving.”

Since COVID-19 struck in March 2020, many churches have found themselves in Cullen MBC’s position. Faced with declining revenues and empty buildings, churches have looked for ways to make an asset out of unused space.

Some have rented out offices and classrooms for those working and learning remotely. Others have hosted “ghost kitchens” that allow restaurants without storefront locations to prepare food for delivery. During the pandemic, Church Space has grown from 45 renters and churches to more than 3,700.

For churches in the US and UK, offering a variety of rentals to local tourists, professional chefs, or burnt-out frontline workers has done undeniable good. For some, offering “champing”—church camping—experiences to travelers has been the difference between eking by or closing altogether.

Day Edwards and Emmanuel Brown launched Church Space in Houston in 2019. The churches who participated in Church Space’s pilot program earned an average of \$23,000–\$38,000 in their first year, according to Edwards.

Church Space currently has about 150 host sites across the US but tends to be concentrated across the Bible Belt. Brown, a pastor himself, said Church Space is “for churches and by church leaders” and works to ensure that host churches are matched with renters who share their values.

“We truly believe that when churches earn more they’re able to do more, not just in their congregation but also in their community,” said Edwards.

The Church Space model allows participating churches to maintain their tax-exempt status, though the cofounders declined to share additional details. “It’s something that sets Church Space apart from the other competitors,” said Edwards.

In the UK, another Airbnb-like service operated from Yorkshire, England, is in the business of providing spiritual respite.

“Both Jasper and I were exhausted in parish ministry,” said Tina Hodges, who owns All Hallows, a former Anglican church, with her husband. “We both spent 20 years ordained as Anglican priests in the Church of England. . . . I was meeting an awful lot of people who were in need of a retreat and was recognizing the need for sacred

space.”

Operating out of All Hallows Church, which sits on land where Christians have worshiped since the sixth century, Eagles Retreat features a renovated interior that highlights the building’s stained-glass windows, spiral staircase, and barrel ceiling. It also includes updates like flat-screen TVs and a jacuzzi.

For additional fees, the couple offers services such as spiritual direction and marriage counseling. They also offer scholarships for those who can’t afford the stay, and according to the website, they “particularly welcome those who have been bereaved, bruised or worn down in life.”

The array of services in the sacred space seems perfectly suited to the pandemic. “I can’t even tell you how many holidays we’ve given for free this year,” said Hodges. “We’ve had a lot more people who’ve needed space or needed people to talk to . . . many people who are key workers, including ministers, who have just been falling apart at the seams.”

Micah Lacher, owner of the Nashville-based Mission Hotels, is a person of faith who sees the hotels as a way to continue the mission of the church buildings they once were.

The five-year-old company’s three hotels include two refurbished churches, which no longer host weekly worship; instead they host guests in beds fashioned with church pew headboards. Mission Hotels’ model is similar to traditional Airbnb properties except that most of the profits are donated to local charities.

“We are providing a refuge and home for our guests with every stay,” said Lacher. “We are pouring into the community and creatively meeting needs for those who are underserved. These churches were doing just the same when they were in the spaces.”

Lacher estimates that Mission Hotels’ donations have been used to provide more than 100,000 showers, meals, and beds through their nonprofit partners Nashville Rescue Mission, ShowerUp Nashville, Room in the Inn, and People Loving Nashville.  
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