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CITIES

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greenway, Roger S.
Cities, missions' new frontier.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

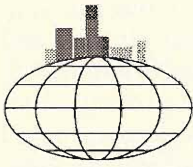
1. Missions. 2. Evangelistic work. 3. City churches. .
4. Cities and towns—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Monsma, Timothy M., 1933— . II. Title.

BV2653.G74 1989 266'.009173'2 89-6962

ISBN 0-8010-3831-6

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The Pros and Cons of Church Buildings

Roger S. Greenway

Church buildings are common sights in most cities, reminding us of the presence and sometimes the prestige of organized Christianity. In Western cities we take church buildings for granted. But today the cost of buying property and erecting traditional types of church buildings is staggering. In every discussion of urban mission strategy, the question inevitably arises as to whether we can *afford* to plant churches in major cities. Compared with the funds needed to start rural congregations, church-planting work in the city appears to be more costly than most mission budgets will allow.

This chapter will examine the pros and cons of church buildings in the city and suggest certain guidelines for deciding whether, and what kind, to build. In a personal letter dated May 24, 1985, Donald McGavran raised the question as to whether urban realities require us to reassess the value of traditional church buildings:

As I look at the amazing growth of house churches in China and remember that the New Testament nowhere records the building of a single building and remember the amazing growth of Yonggi Cho's denomination in Seoul, South Korea, where he has more than 20,000 house churches, I am led increasingly to believe that effective urban evangelization today must mean founding living churches in rented quarters. Perhaps every hundred such churches will erect a central building. But the building must always be regarded as a secondary matter. House churches are led by men and women who receive no salary and who speak about Christ and the Bible in terms understandable to their intimates.

Added to the issues raised by McGavran are questions concerning stewardship and the message conveyed to the poor by the kind of church buildings we typically erect. The lament of the great Japanese urban evangelist Toyohiko Kagawa is highly relevant to today's mission strategists:

The religion of imposing edifices is a heartbreaking affair. It is the soul's cast-off shell. A religion which builds men rather than temples is much to be preferred. For this reason I reject everything connected with the religion of imposing architecture.

Under the eaves of the cathedral nestle the slums. Before the Vatican Palace mercenary troops stand guard. Nothing is so pitiful as the religion of cathedrals, temples, and stately edifices.

Well would it be if the world's churches and temples were razed to the ground. Then possibly we would understand genuine religion.¹

The Pros of Church Buildings

Let's examine some specific factors relevant to this discussion. One factor is the long history behind the erection and setting apart of special buildings for church use. People have come to expect them. It can be argued that because the use of specially designed buildings for religious purposes is such a long-standing tradition, there must be some wisdom to it. To break with this tradition of the Christian religion is a risky undertaking.

There are obvious advantages to having church facilities. A building provides a congregation with a fixed address and a place to which people can be referred. A building may help convey a sense of identity to both the members of the congregation and outsiders. An edifice designed or renovated to meet the ministry needs of the church can be a valuable asset. Besides providing an auditorium for congregational worship, there are classrooms and office space. Church buildings are available for use seven days a week, and that is a big advantage. Anyone who has ever lived with the limitations of rented quarters that were designed for other purposes or are available only certain hours a week knows how difficult such arrangements can be.

Another advantage is privacy for worship, for counseling, and for the various meetings of the church. Buildings offer opportunities for creative ministries in the urban context. They can be places for refreshment and spiritual retreat amid the rush and clamor of the city. If used

1. Cited in Cyril J. Davey, *Kagawa of Japan* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), p. 27.

properly, a downtown or inner-city location can make the church building a kind of oasis for spiritual and emotional renewal. Such oases are much more needed in the city than in rural locations.

In the crowded city of Colombo, on one of the busiest intersections, stands the Church of the Open Door, belonging to the Anglican denomination. Two decades ago this congregation decided that the location of its building should be turned into a witnessing opportunity. Thousands of people—Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians—passed the church doors every day. Many of them lived under crowded and difficult conditions, and a high percentage had personal and spiritual problems which the church thought they might like to talk about. Why not use the building to good advantage and make it a twenty-four-hour-per-day oasis where people could get away from the rush of the street, pray, talk to a Christian counselor, and be exposed to the values and teachings of Christianity?

A price would have to be paid, of course. If the church were to remain open day and night, staff would have to be present at all hours to watch the premises, deal with difficult individuals, and counsel people who might come seeking help of various kinds. There would be some wear and tear on the building if it were exposed around the clock to people from the street. But the church made the decision to maximize the building's location and use it to minister to whoever would come through the doors. Staff was hired, volunteers from within the congregation were trained and organized, and a vital ministry was begun. Seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day the Church of the Open Door is a spiritual oasis and witnessing center for the southern end of the city.

A Message of Commitment

The erection of a building sends a message of commitment to the neighborhood. It shows that the Christians who are making this investment intend to stay and become part of the life of the community. They say by their investment: "We're here to stay and we mean business. We're not a fly-by-night operation." It may be that in the city, where changes occur so rapidly and people have learned to expect short-term commitments from those who claim they want to help, investing in a building says more than a thousand sermons about the intention of the congregation. That may explain why attendance often picks up when a new building is opened.

Buildings are statements to believers and nonbelievers about the builders (or remodelers) and the concept of ministry which they have in

mind. The way a building is designed and the ministry facilities it offers convey a message, and the world hears it.

The commitment of a congregation to a building project also serves to measure the members' loyalty and enthusiasm for the church and its ministry. A building program can spur the development of congregational life because members feel personal ownership of the things they have invested their money in. People are less likely to pick up and leave a church when they've put some of their hard-earned money into erecting or refurbishing its building. If our goal is to make a long-term impact for Christ on a city, making an investment in a building, though it may be a subtle device, is a factor to consider seriously.

In some countries special buildings set apart for Christian worship are required. Services cannot legally be held anywhere else. In Cuba, for example, the law states that all religious activities must take place inside an approved church building. It is difficult to obtain a permit to erect a new church building; the buildings that are approved are under government surveillance and control. Annually, Cuban pastors must submit to the government their church's schedule for the year. The schedule must be posted at the church, and everything the church does must take place in the building. The same is true in many other Communist countries.

In China there is a different situation: there are both underground churches, which technically are illegal, and officially recognized and controlled churches, which occupy designated government-approved buildings. For a quarter century the Christian faith survived and grew through a network of underground churches, while the regular church buildings were kept closed by the Communist government. Today many of the buildings have been reopened for worship, and a great deal of effort is being made by the government to close down the operations of the underground churches. The issue is one of control; by trying to keep everything religious within officially designated buildings, the government hopes to maintain surveillance over Christian teaching and activity.

In Mexico City, evangelical churches face the problem of a law which requires that all church property be owned by the government. This law was enacted at the time of the Mexican Revolution in the early 1900s and was intended to eliminate the vast property holdings of the Roman Catholic Church. But now the law serves as a serious hindrance to the planting of new evangelical churches. When evangelicals begin to hold services in a private home prior to erecting a building, the landlord often objects and threatens to evict the tenant who allows such services in the house; the landlord fears the property may be taken over by the government. When evangelicals buy property and

erect a church building, they must notify government officials and turn over the property to the federal authorities. Even seminary buildings, if properly registered, become federal property in Mexico. Church members pay for the facilities and must maintain the property, but the government holds the title. Even the smallest item of furnishing belongs to the state.

In Muslim countries the erection of a church building often runs into serious difficulty; in strict Muslim nations it may be impossible. We recall what happened to the one Christian church in Kabul, Afghanistan, some years before the Russians invaded the country. This was an international, English-speaking church that with great difficulty obtained permission to erect a building of its own. The building stood there for some time, and then the government bulldozers moved in and demolished it. On the day set for demolition, the Christians cleaned the building and set everything in perfect order, prayed, sang hymns, and thanked God for the time that he had allowed them to use the facility. Then it was destroyed. I have often wondered if the terrible things that have happened to the Afghan government and people since that time are not related somehow to what the Afghan officials did to that church building.

When church buildings are seized to be used for other purposes, they continue to bear silent witness to the Christian faith and the gospel ministry for which they were erected. In China, for instance, where church buildings were seized and used as warehouses and schools for several decades, their original purpose was not forgotten. When the political climate in China changed and permission was granted for Christians to worship openly once again, those same buildings were refurbished and their ministry resumed. They had been closed for a quarter century, but nobody had forgotten that they were church buildings. The buildings had continued to bear witness to the Chinese community.

A final word in favor of church buildings has to do with the feelings of pastors. Most pastors strongly prefer to have their own church building because it gives them a sense of identity, sometimes of pride. This is true in North America and around the world. I have addressed various gatherings of pastors and missionaries on the subject of church property, and I sense that it is an emotional issue with many of them. "Don't take my building away from me," blurted out one young black pastor in Philadelphia, after I had suggested that there might be alternatives to the traditional church building. The same reaction comes from older ministers, who shake their heads at any suggestion that perhaps in the cities we ought to try some other options. They generally regard it as a wild idea that won't work. It is obvious to me that pastors like church buildings, and as long as there is the possibility of erecting and

maintaining them, pastors will work hard to have them. This being the case, maybe it is the way of wisdom to keep them. A contented and hard-working pastor is generally the key to an effective and growing church.

The Negative Factors

But we must also consider the negative side of the question. What does it cost to open a new church in New York City, Hong Kong, or Lagos? The costs are tremendous. When mission agencies examine the costs involved in planting a church in major cities, they shudder. Accustomed as most of them are to working in small villages and rural areas, where land is cheap or free, where building materials can be obtained locally, and volunteer labor can be enlisted to erect the structures, they are reluctant to consider urban areas, where land is expensive, building codes extensive, materials must be purchased, and labor costs are high. Mission budgets simply won't allow church planting in such costly places.

Another negative factor has to do with change in the city, change in the ethnic composition of neighborhoods, in property values, in human wants and needs. Western cities have an abundance of church buildings that one generation of Christians built, used, and then abandoned as members moved to other parts of the city or out to the suburbs. Expensive properties lost their value as the social and economic level of the neighborhoods changed.

Dwindling congregations are often left with beautiful buildings that they cannot fill on Sunday or efficiently use and maintain the rest of the week. Splendid old pipe organs are too expensive to repair and fall silent. Plexiglas has to be installed to protect the stained-glass windows from being broken. Many such buildings have been sold to new congregations whose members represent the ethnic groups that now live in the neighborhood.

It's not bad for church buildings to change hands between congregations if the property continues to be used for Christian purposes, and the new church ministers effectively to the people of the neighborhood. But often the old structures are sold to commercial interests instead of being turned over to congregations that might use them to serve the city and its people. For example, the in thing on the East Coast of the United States is to turn churches with classic architecture into apartment buildings and restaurants. I saw one recently which still retained the brass plates identifying the members in whose hallowed memories the stained-glass windows had been donated. In some

cases, pipe organs which once contributed to congregational worship now entertain restaurant patrons. Something seems profane about the whole thing.

Given the enormous costs of building and maintaining church property, what should be the response of Christian congregations and mission agencies that want to grow and multiply, witness and serve in the city? If we continue to rely on traditional church structures, how are we ever going to raise enough money to plant all the churches that are needed, and how are we going to minister to the poor when we invest so much in brick and mortar? That is Donald McGavran's main point, and we have to face the question squarely. Are there alternatives that will meet the needs of God's people for worship, fellowship, and ministry, and at the same time avoid the negative factors we have enumerated?

Guidelines for Church Builders

As we wade through this murky issue, various principles and guidelines will prove worthy of consideration.

1. We should always put people before property. Theoretically, all of us would agree with that. But often we don't carry it out in actual ministry, especially when it comes to church buildings. In most instances, a major part of our resources, time, and attention is poured into church property. Yet in the New Testament we find no instruction that Christians should seek to erect special buildings for church use. In Jerusalem believers used the temple as long as they could, but when persecution arose they scattered, and from that point on they used homes, rented quarters, or the outdoors. We find no record of church buildings for more than two hundred years, which was the very time when the gospel enjoyed its greatest expansion and churches multiplied all across the Roman world. Early Christians directed their energy to ministering to people and spreading the gospel rather than serving property.

2. We should put the needs of pastors and Christian workers before property acquisition. The New Testament makes it plain that God's people owe their leaders basic sustenance. Kingdom workers should not have to go around begging for support, nor be forced into "tent-making" because the building program receives the church's primary attention. But in many Southern World situations and in the inner cities of North America and parts of Europe, young congregations which cannot afford both to pay their pastor and to erect a building opt time after time for the building and let the pastor's family fend largely for themselves.

I have seen cases where pastors' families were suffering severely because the congregations they served were pouring their resources into the building programs rather than supporting their spiritual leaders. There is no biblical justification for such behavior; in fact, the Bible points in the opposite direction. In 1 Corinthians 9 the Bible teaches that religious workers have the right to material support; nowhere does it suggest that a building program should receive more support than do gospel workers.

3. If, after careful consideration of the factors involved, the congregation decides to purchase property and erect a building, attention should be paid to two things—location and design. Poor choices in either will damage the church's ministry for years to come.

For example, if an out-of-the-way location is chosen, perhaps on a side street where property is cheaper but hard to find, the ministry of the church is going to be affected adversely. Yet so often we find churches located in such places. Hidden churches struggle against the constant burden of their own poorly chosen location. In contrast, wise planners such as those of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in South America have found that choosing favorable locations, highly visible and easily accessible from all parts of the city, has been a boon to church growth. It costs more in the beginning to buy property in a good location, but it pays off in the long run.

Equally important is the layout of the church facility itself. The architectural design says a great deal about a congregation's concept of ministry, its sense of stewardship, and its intentions in the neighborhood and the city. Building design should not be left to the whims of the architect, but should express the congregation's philosophy of ministry.

The style of a church building affects the way the church functions. The size and shape of the building can facilitate ministry or hamper it. If the building is only an auditorium, the church will be telling the community that it is merely a place where people come together, sit on pews, face the front, sing, pray, hear preaching, and then go home. Such buildings can be a great blessing, but they also limit ministries which another type of building could facilitate.

Any congregation that decides to erect a building or remodel an existing structure should study the needs of the people they want to reach and the kind of ministries that might be used to reach them. They should then design a building that will best facilitate the ministries they have in mind. Buildings should be ministry-appropriate.

4. If the property is sold at some later date, the overriding concern ought not to be recouping the investment by selling to the highest bidder, but continuation of Christian ministry to the city and its people. We recognize that there are instances where a neighborhood

changes in such a way that nobody lives there any longer. Such cases are rare, yet they do happen occasionally. But wherever people remain to be reached, evangelized, and ministered to, churches have an obligation to use to that end the properties God has given them.

I have seen sad things happen in North American cities when churches sell their property without concern for its continued use for gospel purposes. It is not wrong in itself for a congregation of a particular racial or ethnic group to relocate its center of worship to a place closer to its members' homes. But an attitude of gross materialism is shown by congregations whose main interest is getting top dollar for their old property. Churches leaving the city need to be thinking about the people they are leaving behind and what kind of church could take over their building to minister more effectively to the needs of the neighborhood.

For the gospel to catch hold in the city, every neighborhood needs churches whose worship and ministry are appropriate to the language, culture, and needs of the people in the area. Inappropriate ministries help nobody, so the transfer of buildings from one congregation to another can sometimes be a blessing. But the governing principle should not be profit, but ministry to city people.

5. Mission subsidy and outside assistance do less damage to a young congregation when such funds are used to acquire church property. An unhealthy dependence results when financial subsidy is used to support pastors and programs. Buildings are more neutral somehow, and funding used for their purchase seems less likely to produce dependence.

This relates to what I wrote earlier about the dilemma facing many Southern World churches when they cannot afford to support a pastor and erect a church building at the same time. Often it is the pastor who pays the price, because congregations tend to choose in favor of the building. It has been my experience that the use of mission money to subsidize pastors is generally harmful to church development and eventually undercuts the pastor's effectiveness. This is because the delicate, sensitive relationship between pastor and congregation hinges on mutual trust and dependency. When foreign subsidy is introduced in any form that lessens the pastor's reliance on the congregation, serious damage is done to the pastor-church relationship. But when foreign money buys brick and mortar, or perhaps a city lot on which to erect a building, no long-term dependence is likely to develop; indeed, if a solid congregation is formed, this is frequently a wise use of mission money.

6. Building acquisition should never be made a fixed—that is, assumed and unquestioned—item in the overall mission strategy. I say this because we simply do not have any New Testament basis for insisting that a building is essential to an effective urban strategy.

Arguing from the New Testament, the most we can say is that a building is an option, a pragmatic issue each group of Christians should decide in its own time and place.

In some places today it is impossible to build a special church building because the government won't allow it or because the leaders of the dominant non-Christian religion will prevent it from happening. We read earlier (p. 209) that more than 150 church buildings were destroyed by Muslims in northern Nigeria in 1987. Suddenly congregation after congregation had to decide whether to rebuild or not. At the time this book is being prepared, some of them are still debating whether it is wiser to rebuild or to find alternative meeting places that might be both useful and less vulnerable. The same question is being faced in some parts of the Philippines, where dozens of church buildings have been closed by insurgents.

7. The Holy Spirit can be relied upon to give urban congregations the creativity to find solutions to the building problem. When traditional church buildings were closed by the Chinese government, Christians found alternative ways to worship God and spread the faith. When the first services were held in the reopened buildings, the officials were stunned to hear the worshipers, young and old, singing Christian hymns from memory. Where had they learned the words and the tunes? In the house churches, at underground worship services, and in other places the officials had never heard about.

On the Eastern seaboard of the United States, some downtown churches have sold the air space above their edifices to developers who keep the old church buildings intact while erecting high-rise office buildings around and above them. From the sale of their air space, the congregations have gained an enormous source of revenue for their ministries, while the original buildings remain in their control. From Singapore to Nairobi, churches are finding creative answers to the questions of where and how to gather for worship and witness. This leads me to conclude that a traditional church building is not always a necessity. The question of whether to erect such a structure must be analyzed carefully from every angle.

I suggest that every church and mission agency should continually be experimenting with new strategies which do not depend on buildings. If we keep ourselves locked into one pattern, we may be missing something important. Rented facilities work amazingly well in some urban contexts. Cell groups and house churches account for much of the growth in many of the world's largest congregations. Some of the best-attended weekly services in Manila are not held in church buildings but in schoolyards, hotel banquet rooms, and public auditoriums. These and other examples from around the world indicate that if we

don't restrict ourselves to one particular mode of operation, there is no limit to the possibilities.

8. To date, we have found no more effective way to promote growth, local leadership, and group identity than home cells and house churches. Big, united services are helpful, but home cells are the cutting edge of church growth and discipleship. Different configurations can be used to tie the cells together and rally believers periodically in larger gatherings. But in big cities nothing surpasses the small group for effective penetration of every apartment building, language group, social class, and neighborhood.

9. The principle of good stewardship must be applied to building acquisition and design. If we are going to reach the masses in the cities and plant all the churches that are needed, we must do some things we haven't done before and think of some designs we haven't previously considered.

Let's strike out for simplicity of design. We have all heard the familiar argument about how much was spent building Solomon's temple in the Old Testament, and that only the best should be considered good enough for God's house. But let's not forget that all the adornments of Solomon's temple are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The temple symbolized Christ, and now he has come. We should not try to duplicate or imitate his beauty through something else. The embellishments which Christians commonly put into church buildings, the glory we put into brick and mortar, are hard to justify in the light of the need of missions, the physical plight of the urban masses, the relative poverty of many Christians, and the sacrifices made by many pastors and other kingdom workers. I venture to say that most of the wealth we pour into church buildings is not to glorify God at all, but is nothing more than self-aggrandizement under the guise of religious zeal. I think the angels weep at many a building dedication, and so does the Lord. That is Kagawa's point (see p. 235), and I think he is entirely correct.

In planning a church structure, we should consider the atmosphere of the building and what it ought to convey. If we think scripturally of what the church is all about, the metaphor that comes to mind is the body of Christ and the family of God. That being so, what kind of a design produces the most familylike atmosphere? Rarely is body life, family life, clearly expressed in church architecture. What is so familylike about a Gothic structure with a tall ceiling and ramparts? Where is that suggested in the Bible?

If design is to be instrumental in promoting body life for the people of God, what should a church building look like? What should be the mood and atmosphere, the feel of the building? I suggest that the proper feel is that of a living room, the place where the family gathers. In contrast, I would characterize most of our church buildings as having the architec-

ture of grandeur. I suspect that this all started at a time when church design was intended to convey the grandeur of the episcopacy, of the empire, of hierarchy. It was not the church at its best, but at one of its weaker moments, that came to dominate church architectural design. I think, however, that the domestic atmosphere is more in line with the New Testament symbolism of the church as the body of Christ and the family of God, and this should be built into church design. We need a meeting place with a lower ceiling, a chair configuration which allows people to see one another's faces and not just the backs of heads, a place where interaction is promoted. Such features enhance the fellowship of God's family when they meet for worship and edification.

Consider the question in the light of the difference between a warship and a cruise ship. Cruise ships are beautiful. We have all admired the advertisements of vacation trips aboard these glistening white vessels. Cruise ships have lovely lounges, deck chairs, swimming pools, and staterooms with comfortable beds and furnishings. They are costly to build and maintain. They are beautiful boats, but who would want to fight a battle in one? They are built for pleasure, comfort, and relaxation. But a warship, on the other hand, isn't pretty at all. There is no chrome, no fancy wood, no swimming pool. The sleeping quarters aren't plush, and the designs are strictly utilitarian. But they are good in a battle, because it is for battle they were conceived.

Church buildings can be like pleasure yachts or battleships. What's the church in this world for? What's urban mission all about? Are we here to cruise along comfortably, or are we here to fight the Lord's battle in the city? Our answer will be revealed by the kind of buildings we choose.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you know of a congregation that intentionally gathers for worship in rented facilities? How is the arrangement working out?
2. Evaluate the argument that if church property is going to be sold, it makes sense to try to get the highest possible price, regardless of who the buyer may be or what that party intends to do with the property.
3. What has been your experience in home cells and small groups? Can your spiritual needs be satisfied in the long run without the large gathering and the special building?
4. How do you propose Christian missions tackle the problem of high prices, enormous populations, limited resources, and the need to multiply city churches? Design a strategy.