

# CHURCH BUILDINGS – DO THEY MATTER?

By Donnelly McClelland



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's unprecedented decree (10 July) converting Hagia Sophia once again into a mosque continues to reverberate across the region and beyond. It elicited sharp criticism, despair, and disappointment from both Christians and non-Christians alike. The 1,500-year-old UNESCO-listed site was initially an Orthodox Christian cathedral that was turned into a mosque following the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul (then Constantinople) in 1453. The father of modern Turkey – secularist leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk – then turned it into a museum in 1934. He hoped it

would be an emblem of a new Turkey, capable of blending the features of the East and the West. However, there are many who believe that Mr Erdoğan's action will now promote the opposite – greater division, and exclusion of Turkey's minority groups, particularly Christians.

The controversy over the designation and functionality of the Hagia Sophia raises some interesting questions regarding church buildings. Granted, the Hagia Sophia was not functioning as a church when Mr Erdoğan repurposed it as a mosque, but at an earlier stage, it had been a church, before being changed into a mosque. For some Orthodox Christians, Mr Erdoğan's action is seen as a "reconquering" of a deeply significant Christian landmark.

## WHAT IS CHURCH, AND WHERE DO BUILDINGS FIT IN?

Jesus spoke of 'church' on two occasions – Matthew 16:18 where He declared: "I will build my Church"; and Matthew 18:17 in the context of discipline and bringing a matter before "the church". It is easy to see in the context of each that He is speaking of the universal Church and a local church. He also appears to be saying is that His disciples should belong to both. All Christians belong to "the" Church, but unfortunately, not all Christians belong to "a" church, a local church. Christ came to build both – and THE Church is made up of local churches. It should not need to be said, but what most (if not all) should know is that 'church' is not a building. 'Church' is people, whether they meet in a building, or out in the open, or under a tree, or in a cave. The Greek word translated 'church' in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. A literal translation of *ekklesia* would be "a called-out assembly." According to Scripture, the Church is the people – the "living stones" (1 Pe 2:5), the "Body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27), Christ's Bride (2 Cor 11:2) – not the building where they gather. "For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them." (Matt 18:20) – that is the Church. And Stephen sums up the position in Acts 7 when he reminds the people our God "does not dwell in temples made with human hands."

So, where do church buildings fit in? What is their purpose in the life of a Christian? Are they necessary? And if so, in what way? In the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, many church buildings have been closed for months and some wonder what the future holds for traditional church buildings (whether it is the parish chapel, large auditoriums, or stately cathedrals)?

Some argue that church buildings are superfluous, an extravagance, and propose a "simplified, early New Testament style" of home church – small gatherings of believers in someone's home. It is a reasonable argument – for two to three hundred years, the early Church it would seem (based on some scriptures – e.g. 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Philemon 2) met, and grew, within this form of gathering. However, in 1 Cor 11:17, when Paul admonishes the Corinthians:

“...What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” thus implying that they were meeting as a church elsewhere (other than their houses).

The ‘underground’ Church in China was largely established and saw tremendous growth via ‘home church’ style gatherings. But, nowhere in the New Testament does it command or forbid that local churches meet in homes. The Lord, it seems, chose not to prescribe or regulate the manner of gathering, possibly because of the incredibly diverse cultural situations that the church would find itself in, around the world, and through the ages. And thus, in time – historical evidence points to around 230 A.D. – the first purpose-built (or renovated house) church was established in Eastern Syria.

The reasons for purpose-built churches are numerous and diverse, but include at least a few of the following:

## BUILT TO GATHER

*“The Gospel is never for individual but always for a people. Sin fragments us, separates us, and sentences us to solitary confinement. Gospel restores us, unites us, and sets us in community. The life of faith revealed and nurtured in the biblical narratives is highly personal but never merely individual: always there is a family, a tribe, a nation – church.”*  
(Eugene Peterson, *Reverse Thunder*)

A central tenant in the Christian faith is ‘community’ – even in the highly individualised West. In John’s day (when he wrote Revelation) it was politically dangerous to assemble together; a private faith would have been safer and more convenient. But those early communities of believers often risked their lives to meet, to fellowship together, because they understood the importance and value of living out their faith within a community. In some parts of the world today this is still the case, the possibility of persecution (imprisonment, penalties, physical abuse, or death) does not reduce or eliminate that need to gather as community.



But does it matter where one meets, is a physical structure necessary? M. Craig Barnes (in “Church buildings aren’t just buildings”) explains the role of church buildings in terms of the community of believers as follows: *“God certainly doesn’t need a cherished old building to unfold our calling. As the psalmists repeatedly remind us, ‘all the earth belongs to the Lord.’ A long walk in the wilderness or the crowded, smelly platform of a subway station can also become a holy place of sacred encounter. But to make sense of those encounters we gather with others in some place of worship ‘to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple, which the psalmist David calls his greatest desire.*

*That temple can be a Gothic cathedral, a storefront church, or a coffeehouse that doubles as the sanctuary of a new church plant. But we need the familiarity of our place to worship. That can involve the way the chairs are set up, the screen displaying the songs we sing, and the large thermos in the back that drips lemonade on the floor. Or it can mean uncomfortable pews, the creak of the stairs to the balcony, the cross up front we behold every week, and the small memorial plaques on the windows that whisper of someone who was here before us, someone who was also trying to behold God’s beauty and inquire about calling.*

*Everyone who graduated from Sunday school got the lesson that the real church is a family of Christian faith and not the building where they meet. Right. But every family needs a home.”*

Nigel Walter (in “Why our church buildings matter”) explains: “But for me the most important reading of the church is as a material narrative, as the physical story of the gathered community in that particular place.” A key benefit of a physical structure is that it often stands for generations of believers in a particular location, and even with the passing of time, there is often some physical evidence that remains to indicate that a local church met in that location – a tangible legacy. Purpose-built structures are designed to practically accommodate a fair-sized gathering, with the accompanying amenities such as restrooms, other smaller rooms, kitchen, etc.

## BUILT TO HONOUR

*“You see, God gifts us creatively and artistically. He gives some people the means and the gifts to express art to the glory of God in ways few others can. In music. In stained glass. In architecture. In construction. In design and in the resulting worship and liturgy. Some churches need to release those gifts into the culture. Some churches. Not all.”* (Internet Monk)

Exodus 31:1-6 explains about the Lord choosing skilled craftsmen to build the Tabernacle of Meeting. He says specifically (in vs 6): “And behold, I Myself have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and **in the hearts of all who are skilful I have put skill**, that they may make all that I have commanded you.”

When it comes to church buildings, there seem to be two guiding principles that many have pursued: glorifying God and building to last. For many congregations, their place of meeting reflects their theology, it is a physical representation and testimony to the world of the universal Church and the God they serve. In some communities where Christians form a minority group and many have come from another religious group where they practised their belief in a ‘set-apart’ structure, to not have a dedicated place of worship is often seen as irreverent.



The term “Poor Man’s Bible” is a modern term used to describe works of art within churches and cathedrals which either individually or collectively illustrate teachings of the Bible, for a largely illiterate audience. These artworks may take the form of carvings, paintings, mosaics, or stained-glass windows.

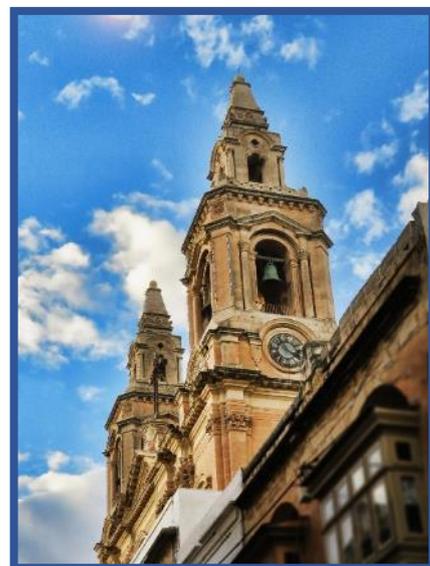
There is obviously extensive debate over costs of buildings and how the church spends its funds, but skilful contributions from congregation members (whether they be fine artists, architects, or the like), which honour the Lord, could be incredibly beneficial and add a unique quality to a particular ‘house of worship’.

## BUILT TO BECKON

*“Your building is there 24 hours a day, seven days a week and it can act as a beacon for your faith for anyone passing by or coming in.”* (Arthur Rank Centre – Rural Church Buildings)

Maher<sup>1</sup>, a Syrian Christian from a Muslim Background, shares in his testimony how a local Catholic Church’s peeling bells beckoned him ever nearer. In a tumultuous time in his life, he sought answers and found them in Christ, as revealed in the Bible given to him – and patiently explained – by a Catholic priest. In a Muslim-majority nation where Maher had been told all kinds of ‘horror’ stories about what went on in a church, he overcame the fear and uncertainty and eventually entered that church building, and encountered Christ. What if there had not been a very visible church building in his community? How much more difficult would it possibly have been in a country like Saudi Arabia where church buildings are forbidden, and believers meet in secret, if at all? Maher also explained how the rituals and practices of the church provided a sort of ‘bridge’ due to his background where tradition and ritual were recognisable features.

Church buildings (and other religious places of worship) often command a very central or prominent position in a town or city. It is meant to be seen (and in the case of bells, heard). It very regularly represents that “city on a hill” which cannot be hidden, and that “light



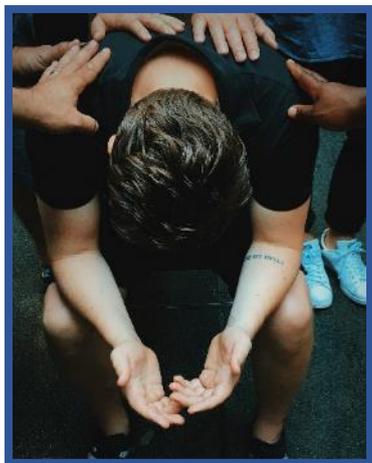
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<sup>1</sup> Name changed for security reasons

set on a stand” to give light to everyone (Matt 5:14-16). Some church buildings, such as those in South Korea, even have lit crosses on top of their buildings which shine brightly at night.

## BUILT TO SEND

*“These buildings also enable a variety of gatherings – such as VBS [vacation bible school], gift distributions, special celebrations, women’s fellowship gatherings, literacy training, and more – that invest in the spiritual and physical condition of the community.”* (Gospel for Asia)



Church buildings have been used in diverse contexts to train up future pastors, missionaries, and youth leaders. But, for many, the gathering of believers on a Sunday, in a church building, is very much like a boxer retiring to a corner of the boxing ring for refreshment, encouragement, direction, in order to be “sent” back into the world – the ‘boxing ring’ – and fulfil their specific calling.

Many congregations have seen the need to formalise their training of church leaders and make use of their building and related facilities to do just that. For some, it has resulted in entire campuses and formal universities. Many congregations have become acutely aware that their facilities need to be utilised throughout the week, not just on a Sunday, and this has led to basic-skills training centres, educares and schools, bookshops, ‘soup kitchens’, after-school care centres and activity centres for the aged.

## WHAT CHURCH BUILDINGS CANNOT DO

Whatever reason/s a local church might have to utilise a specific building (either purpose-built; or altered for that specific purpose) in which to gather, it is important to mention that a building can only ‘do’ certain things while being totally incapable of ‘doing’ other vitally important activities in the life of a local church.

In, and of themselves, buildings cannot:

- **Save people** – despite many church buildings through the ages being used as a sanctuary or ‘place of safety’, it would only have been temporary shelter or refuge during tumultuous times, but in the spiritual sense of saving, we know that only Christ can truly save and that unless the truth of the Gospel is preached within the walls of a church building, those in attendance will not be ‘saved’, no matter how secure the building’s structure might be.
- **Get more people** – no matter how attractive and appealing a building might be, it will not ultimately be the primary ‘drawcard’ for non-believers. The life-changing power of the Gospel and Holy Spirit as preached from the word, and demonstrated by the body of believers who gather in the building, will impact the lives of seekers.
- **Increase giving** – having, or not having a building will not encourage attendees to increase their giving – sound teaching and effective examples are far more likely to have the desired effect.
- **Disciple people** – no matter how the building is decorated, or how much symbolism is included in order to convey truths of Scripture, true discipleship can only be achieved through relationships, and ‘doing life’ together, in community. The building is merely a vessel, a venue, where ‘community’ can be expressed and demonstrated.

## THE DESTRUCTION, REPURPOSING, AND CLOSING OF CHURCH BUILDINGS

Ever since local churches began to meet in specific buildings almost two millennia ago, there have been those who have sought to “shut the doors”, to eliminate the churches’ witness in various locations across the world. Limiting and destroying church-owned property has been a key form of religious persecution. Various enemies of the Gospel believe that if a church’s ‘home’ is destroyed they have gone a long way towards curbing that church’s influence in that location. However, for many churches that find themselves in such a position it will often stir greater zeal for their mission to share the Gospel as they see it as an indication that they must be doing something right, if they are

considered such a great threat. It might require a period of “going to ground” to consolidate, but in time that church will rise again to continue its calling. However, there have been examples in history of sustained and systematic efforts to eradicate the Church, with devastating effect. Some countries that used to have a minority (but thriving) Christian presence now barely have a presence at all. A recent example would be the onslaught of the Islamic State (IS) group on Christians (and other minority groups) in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq. A more distant example was the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman empire during the First World War. In almost all cases, desecration and destruction of church property accompanied the attack on persons.



Elizabeth Kendal (international religious liberty analyst and advocate), in her assessment of the Hagia Sophia ‘repurposing’, said: “The issue of Hagia Sophia’s status serves as a barometer with which we can measure imperialist and supremacist, ethnic (Turkish) and religious (Islamic) pressure, now clearly rising in Turkey. The trend bodes ill for Turkey’s remnant Greek, Assyrian and Armenian Christians (the descendants of genocide survivors), as well as for Turkey’s growing cohort of Christian converts from Islam.”

Some countries (e.g. Egypt, Russia, China, etc.) enact laws to try and control church activities, and these are often related to buildings and property. It is viewed as a means to influence the size and activity of a local church. So, although church buildings can often be a tremendous blessing for a local church, it can often be used by the ‘enemy’ against that church. In less extreme cases and in countries without such restrictions, the ‘enemy’ will often still try to attack a church by using the buildings against the church – the maintenance costs, arguments over what the buildings should be utilised for outside of church activities, etc. can often be highly contentious, and lead to division and distraction.

In the West, many church buildings have been closed or repurposed for a variety of reasons – for most, the numbers attending services dwindled to the point where the costs to maintain the building outstripped the giving; for others, shifting cultural and economic factors saw the community move elsewhere. Thus, church buildings remain a highly debated topic.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is also having a huge impact on church communities across the world – many have not gathered in their buildings for months (while bills and running costs still needed to be paid – though maybe slightly reduced). The future of many of these buildings may now be in the balance and communities may need to find creative ways to utilise their buildings going forward.

In the book of Revelation, the Lord addresses the seven churches – and a key phrase He uses repeatedly is: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This remains true today – the Spirit speaks, churches are called to hear what He has to say to them. This goes for the issue of church buildings too – they can be a mighty tool and vessel for the local church, but the church needs to be attentive to the Spirit’s guidance – from whether they need a specific building in the first place (or whether to hire a venue, or use homes, etc.), to how to utilise the space, and how to effectively steward the resources at their disposal for the fulfilment of their calling. COVID-19 did not catch the Lord by surprise as it did for many people, and thus we can be assured that He has a specific plan for churches in how to move forward, especially in a post-COVID world. It is highly unlikely that the use of buildings will disappear, but it may very well take on quite a different ‘look’ in the future. But it is always reassuring to know that the Lord has said that He is building His Church (His people, His Bride), and “the gates of Hell” (in whatever form) will not ultimately prevail. And may the Church never forget that, as the people of God, we are called not to simply inhabit a building together. As a body of believers, united in Christ, it is our role is to worship God, to nurture and edify one another, and

to reach out to a suffering world with the saving message of the gospel, as well as the practical compassion and mercy exemplified in Christ. Whenever buildings can be used to further this purpose, may it be done in a God-honouring manner.

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Peterson, Eugene. *Reverse Thunder*

## Images

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