

Pandemic and Church Buildings

COVID-19 and Its Impact on the Property of the Western Church

It is still early days in the pandemic here at the beginning of April 2020 but we are starting to see some changes that may have far-reaching impacts on the Christian church and upon its buildings. Those churches that have bravely got to grips with online video technology using Facebook live stream, Youtube or some other medium to connect with their members and offer worship services in a virtual world are providing much-needed connection. Bravo to them all!

To introduce the next point let me go back to 2007 when I visited Mariner's Church, Irvine, California. They had recently constructed a large church complex, surrounded by car parking as usual, but incorporating a well-equipped and attractive café with a full commercial kitchen. Despite not being on a street frontage, they had found a number of people choosing to attend the café during worship services and watching the service proceed on the closed-circuit TV screens in the café.

The church leaders had found that this enabled people that were not yet ready to sing worship songs to see what was going on including Bible readings and the main message. They were not being asked to participate in something that they did not yet believe.

In today's article in "My Christian Daily", Thom Rainer forecasts some changes for Christian pastors as a result of the current pandemic:

- More pastors will see the building as a means, not an end.
- More pastors are rediscovering and re-engaging with their communities.
- Pastors are looking at metrics differently – 125 normally attend, but 500 have been viewing online. My own church had a similar increase in views for the online service.



Mariners Church cafe in 2007

This last point has a parallel with my Mariners Church experience. There is interest out there to find out more about the Christian faith, but people want to do so without being required to profess it when so much is unclear to them in this post-Christendom world.

So what impact does all this have on our buildings? People can participate or just view without being on-site. We need to actively enable this, perhaps by continuing online when the pandemic is over. We should be providing facilities that allow engagement and encourage curiosity without requiring them to make a statement of faith. Buildings may need to incorporate a small studio space to make it easy to provide webinars and video preparation. Some of our property is not essential and should be redeployed for other mission priorities such as meeting a housing need or realising value to fund contemporary communication such as we have had to do at the present time. If you have a foyer café, don't close it during the service, open it up.

Mariners church wisely appointed a pastor to serve the "people of the café". How do we respond to the challenge of the virtual "followers"?

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