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## An Exploration of the Theological Tensions in the Use of Churches for Events

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# An Exploration of the Theological Tensions in the Use of Churches for Events

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The increasing prevalence of events within leisure and business activities (Dowson & Lamond, 2017), is reflected in the models of engagement by church organisations with their congregations and visitors. This increasing need for venues for events has brought about a new concept of 'venuefication' (Dowson & Lamond, 2017), which means that it is possible for any building, space or site to become a venue for an event. The growth of the experience economy in which consumers are moving from amassing possessions to acquiring experiences (Wood, 2009) influences a trend towards the Eventization of faith (Dowson 2018). For churches and other sacred spaces, theological perspectives impact on the extended uses of consecrated buildings.

This article analyses and contributes to continuing theological discussions on the use of churches for purposes other than worship services, in particular, as venues for events. It provides a critical evaluation of the secondary use of churches for event activities within the realm of religious tourism, considering in particular their differing theological perspectives. The paper suggests solutions to the issues that can arise from the use of churches and their associated buildings for events.

Following the agreement of Guidelines by the Pontifical Council for Culture of the Roman Catholic Church in November 2018 (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2018b) on the use of decommissioned churches, this topic is of relevance to churches of all denominations, with potential application to sacred buildings of other religions. The practical and policy considerations for transforming a church into an event venue are discussed, proposing a sustainable model for use by local church organisations.

This study provides examples of churches used as event venues from Italy, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden and England, across Catholic and Protestant denominations (including Anglican and Lutheran), as well as non-denominational churches.

**Key Words:** Eventization of faith, Religious tourism, Venuefication, Church tourism, Church buildings

## Introduction

As societies around the world are experiencing an increasing proliferation of leisure and business events that permeate life in general (Dowson & Lamond, 2017), organisations that inhabit those societies also engage in events. These burgeoning levels of event activity are reflected in the development of new models of engagement between church congregations and visitors, and by church management and operational teams. This article provides a critical evaluation of the secondary use of churches for event activities within the realm of religious tourism, considering in particular their differing theological perspectives. The paper suggests solutions to the issues that can arise from the use of

churches and their associated buildings for events. The literature discussed in detail begins with an analysis of the historical biblical context for the use of sacred space – this is important because Christian church buildings did not develop for some time after the death of Christ. A range of perspectives on the theology of sacred spaces are investigated and considered in the context of the use of this space for events, religious and otherwise. The third section of the literature review focuses on the alternative and extended use church buildings, with examples obtained through visits. The methodological approach was to combine the data from on-site visits to some fifty churches, over a period of eight years, across seven countries, for thematic consideration of their use.

The researcher's thinking about theological aspects of the concept of sacred space was triggered by an observation of photographs taken at a private event that were shared on Facebook (Heward 2017). It seems improper to disclose the identity of the Protestant cathedral that hired out its space to the organisers of a Prosecco Fair in which half-naked male waiters served alcohol to guests. Responses evoked by this event included views that such activities were unsuitable in a cathedral, and that holding an event of this type was an especially incongruous use of a sacred space. However, the financial challenges that face many churches, and the cultural and community contexts they inhabit, influence and promote this extended use of religious buildings for activities other than church services.

The Prosecco Fair incident prompted investigations that led to the collection of other examples of events held in churches, and to developing personal theological reflections. This research article approaches the range of theological concerns from the combined hermeneutical lens of an academic and a professional events practitioner, as well as that of a priest. To begin to define what might be the appropriate use of sacred spaces, based on theological, ethical, social and moral boundaries, this research involved obtaining published information from different Catholic and Protestant Christian denominations, and visiting churches whilst travelling. This article suggests processes which could be put in place to set boundaries with potential hirers.

### Historical Biblical Context

In turning to the Bible for insight, whilst there are numerous earlier references to worshipping God on the holy mountain, Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:12, Exodus 7:16, Isaiah 27:13 and Psalm 99:9), the scriptural foundations of worship space and the development of church buildings largely derive from the Old Testament, with the description of Solomon building the temple and its furnishings (1 Kings:6-7). In the New Testament, the Book of Acts demonstrates the practice of the apostles as they went first to preach in Jewish synagogues, then as an illicit, underground movement, the early church began meeting in people's homes for safety. The earliest known example of a house adapted for Christian worship is found in Syria at Dura Europos, dated around 232 (White, 2006). Meanwhile, the Book of Revelation provides a glimpse of the amazing environment of heavenly worship space visualised in

God's throne room. The architecture of the traditional church building has a number of similarities with the ancient Jewish Temple; the three sections of the Temple, divided into the 'portico, main hall and inner sanctum' reflected a layout found in earlier religious sites in the region. The temple furnishings included lampstands, a stone incense altar and a table for the bread of the presence. In Hebrews 9, the writer refers to the earthly tabernacle, with its lampstand and table for consecrated bread. Whilst such furnishings provided a template for the future, objects such as the sacred jar of manna might have given encouragement to future generations to maintain space for relics and other revered items. Davies (1968) and Turner (1979) built on this biblical context and provided a depth of study on the historical developments of church buildings and their sacred and secular uses. The debate in the late 1960s focussed on the secular nature of Christianity and the relationship between the sacred and the secular, as Davies (1968) considered the practicalities of the church building, rather than focusing on purely architectural or liturgical functions. Turner (1979) mapped the development of Christian places of worship from their origins as meeting places for the community, to becoming temples, holy places that represent and become ontologically, the entrance places to the gates of heaven, enabling access to the divine.

### Theology of Sacred Space

The following section considers how the theology of sacred space has developed. Prior to the 2020 pandemic, our world has been dominated by events of all sizes, whether in business or leisure (Dowson & Lamond, 2017), and churches have reflected this cultural context, whether for the purpose of engaging with members of their own congregations or with the wider community. Churches of different denominations have imposed varying degrees of moral, ethical and theological boundaries on what is deemed to be the appropriate use of sacred space. This section begins by asking 'What is sacred space?' and discussing how this key construct might be defined in order to assess the appropriate use of sacred space for events.

More recent discussions on the theory of sacred space derives from the work of sociologists, ethnographers and religious historians such as Durkheim (2008 [1912]), van Gennep (1960), and Eliade (1957). Durkheim (2008 [1912]) initially suggested that the difference between sacred and profane is unquestionable, denying that a

place, person or object could be both sacred and profane at the same time. Eliade (1957) comprehended the sacred and profane as two modalities of experience, divided by an abyss. Smith considered the work of van Gennep, Durkheim and other discussions of spatial classifications of the sacred and profane, questioning whether the sacred is 'best understood as an expression or an experience, as a representation or a presence' (Smith, 2004:103). This observation summarises the roots of the key differences in attitude towards a definition of sacred space, and the consequent considerations of its use.

If the sacred is something that is separate and set apart, how then is it possible to permit a sacred space to be used for non-religious or 'profane' activities? For Eliade, 'every sacred space implies a hierophany' (1957:26). (A hierophany is a manifestation of the divine, or an evidence of the sacred.) In the same way that a saint manifests the sacred through holy actions, a church building or other sacred space also demonstrates the sacred. Eliade senses the divine presence, with spaces such as churches being 'inherently sacred due to that supernatural presence within them' (Kilde, 2008:5). This view is not limited to Christianity, but has been apparent throughout human history, from the ancient Greek Parthenon to the Temple in Jerusalem. However, the alternate perspective is also present within a range of religions, including parts of the Christian church, viewing the divine presence as 'metaphorical' (Kilde, 2008:5).

Kilde observes that 'there is often a very fine line between 'real' presence and metaphorical presence' (2008:5), recognising the differences in theological perspectives that exist in Christianity. Kilde (2008) explains that Roman Catholics believe in and experience divine presence in their churches and other sacred spaces, as well as in consecrated bread and wine (as the body and blood of Jesus). On the other hand, Protestants are more likely to view the sacredness of churches as more metaphorical than actual, with the people as a community of worshippers bringing the element of the sacred with them (Kilde, 2008).

As Smith indicates, for many people in different denominations, a church building is a place of the numinous, a place to connect with God, concurring with Durkheim that anything which comes into contact with the sacred, is sacralised by that sacred contact. McAlpine (2006) identifies the changes in focus from the perspectives of Durkheim and Eliade, to those of

contemporary times, suggesting that we have witnessed a diminishing distance between what is considered sacred and what is profane, which impacts on the increasing use of churches in the present day. Indeed, Smith argues that Durkheim's view developed and evolved. Towards the end of his treatise on 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', Durkheim suggested that 'the sacred is ambiguous or ambivalent' (Smith, 2004:107), in contrast with his earlier view that sacred and profane were 'binary, spatial classification categories that must be kept apart' (Smith, 2004:107).

Durkheim initially distinguished the sacred and profane as a non-debateable dualism. However, this approach is critiqued by Smith, who notes the difficulties of attempting to classify the dichotomy of this dualism, instead of 'confronting complexity' (2004:40). Smith indicates the range of what is sacred and what is profane, arguing that 'what appears, ideologically speaking, as dual, is a radical reduction of an extended plenum of graduated positions' (2004:42).

Theologically, the presence of God is no longer limited to the confines of an architectural space such as a church or a cathedral, but may be experienced by just a few disciples gathering together, whether in their homes or elsewhere. Such contemporary gatherings hark back to the origins of Christianity, where disciples met together in private homes, often in secret, before any churches were built. These activities included the sharing of meals, as well as time for worship and teaching, and the lack of common resources as well as the threat of persecution meant that these private meeting places were safer if hidden away, unobserved by public eyes (Turner, 1979). As the Roman Empire acquired the Christian faith, observance and practice adopted the mores of the conquering culture, establishing Christian places of worship to rival those of the Roman and Greek gods (McAlpine, 2006), and separating the spaces between ordinary daily life and sacred time. Thus, the early context of Christianity defined the 'church' as the people, meeting together to participate in worship and to share in each other's lives, and it was only later that the concept of sacred space began to arise for Christian faith adherents. In the intervening centuries, churches and cathedrals of great beauty have been designed to glorify God, as much a form of worship as any psalm or hymn. In the present day, new forms of church buildings are being designed to house the growing numbers of people attending mega-churches in particular, whilst the idea of building a multi-

purpose space is prevalent both in transformations of existing churches, as well as in new builds. McAlpine (2006) provides evidence of the construction of multi-purpose church buildings suitable for holding town hall assemblies and political meetings in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, whilst many traditional parish churches and cathedrals hosted local market days within their walls.

Kilde (2008) suggests that whilst religious ritual takes place in religious space, the purpose of religious space is greater than providing this function. The way that many church buildings have been designed and constructed helps to focus the attention of the worshipper on the divine. It supports the building and development of relationships between congregation members. It demonstrates and delineates hierarchy, and conveys teaching about the religion and the local religious community. Externally, these buildings represent the religion to the outside world. Within these several understandings there exists great diversity that indicates both cultural and religious meaning.

Kilde (2008) discusses the work of Smith (2004), which identified the differences between places being (super) naturally imbued with divine presence, and sacred spaces that are created by society. It is apparent that whilst there may be an initial trigger or connection with the sacred in a specific place, human action often generates continuing sacralization.

These arguments are pertinent to our discussion regarding the use of churches (that may otherwise lie empty during the week) for non-sacred activities. If, as Smith suggests, the actions of people continue to sacralise a sacred space (whether a church, cathedral or shrine), is there an equal and opposite result of non-sacred activities in de-sacralizing those spaces?

### **Alternative and Extended Uses of Church Buildings**

The emergence of secularism and the consequent retreat of the church (in the developed world) from public life is marked by a decline in religious control of a range of social functions such as education, as well as a reduction in numbers attending church services (Davie, 2007; Bruce, 2011). As a result, church congregations began to dwindle, and as numbers of congregants declined, the continued upkeep of all church buildings has become financially impossible. This trend resulted

in the decommissioning and sale of redundant church buildings, that were adapted and repurposed as hotels, apartments and caf  s, as well as nightclubs, restaurants and gyms. Examples are listed below.

The most common purpose for adapted church buildings is for residential use (Amayu, 2014). For example, the Queen Street United Methodist Church in Kingston Ontario, Canada, rebuilt in 1920 following a fire that destroyed the previous church building of that name on the same site, was adapted for this purpose. Plans approved in 2013 outlined the construction of 16 apartments within the church building (Amayu, 2014:25).

The German state of Thuringia found that 2,000 of the German Evangelical Church's buildings were lying empty. Willingh  fer and Weitemeier (2017) documented a collective community project that presented the results of the transformation of 500 of these churches into cultural assets. Whilst the church retained ownership, the buildings were developed into important leisure and cultural resources to serve their local communities, instead of being sold to developers. In Germany, churches are protected by the state, and valued as architectural monuments, forming visible local landmarks. Many of these buildings have been repurposed as event and cultural spaces for use by the local population.

The Churches Conservation Trust (TCCT, 2016), the national charity for historic churches in England, is responsible for the protection and redevelopment of historic places of worship that no longer have a congregation for regular worship. The CCT delivers major 'new use' projects, partnering with local community groups to develop a range of purposes. These are mostly cultural spaces for leisure and events.

Trinity St David's Congregational Chapel, built in the Woodhouse area of central Leeds, England, in 1898, was deconsecrated and became the Halo nightclub in 2004. A bar, The Quilted Llama, was added in 2005 (Mead & Howey, 2014). These both closed in 2014, when the renamed 'Church' nightclub was opened, which itself closed in 2019 (Hutchinson, 2019), to make way for a new Library for Leeds University.

Examples such as these show an often co-ordinated repurposing of deconsecrated and decommissioned churches as well as of underused churches that remain consecrated. This trend for repurposing churches that

are no longer in functional use has also influenced a new development: extending the use of churches outside of normal Sunday religious activities (Pillay, 2013). This 'extended use' covers the practice of church buildings opening up for secular and non-liturgical activities, with the aim of bringing in much-needed income and reintegrating churches into the life of their local community, usually through events (Pillay, 2013; Dowson, 2014).

## Discussions and Denominational Differences

Several Christian denominations have explored in depth the use of churches for alternative purposes. However, different denominations have taken very different views on what is permissible. The following section reviews considerations on the preservation of religious heritage by non-governmental agencies, as well as denominations. It should be noted that Orthodox churches have not been considered in this study due to access, but future research would aim to include this, the third largest branch of Christianity after Catholicism and Protestantism (Diamant, 2017).

### International Agencies and Associations

In 1989 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe demonstrated how it understood the importance of appropriate use when it passed Resolution 916. This directive required that efforts be made to ensure that future uses of unviable religious buildings (of whatever persuasion), should be compatible with their original purpose (Council of Europe, 1989). The International Council on Monuments and Sites (IUCN, n.d.) and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2008) have similarly adopted participatory perspectives that reuse should reflect the original purpose of religious heritage spaces that are no longer in use for their primary purpose, and secular associations such as The Future for Religious Heritage ([www.frh-europe.org](http://www.frh-europe.org)) have campaigned for the protection of such sites for over a decade. One of the most common uses for such buildings is as venues for events.

### Belgium: Roman Catholic Church

In 2012, the Roman Catholic Flemish bishops published guidelines to advise dioceses and parishes on the extended use of parish churches. These guidelines introduced three categories of use, including enhanced use, which allows

for 'occasional and appropriate use of the church building for art, historical tours, concerts, lectures, conferences or temporary exhibitions' (CRKC, 2012). The Centre for Religious Art and Culture (Centrum voor Religieuze Kunst en Cultuur) is the centre of expertise for religious heritage in Flanders and Brussels, as recognised by the Flemish government. The CRKC has responsibility for oversight and management of religious buildings and objects, and continues to lead the discussion on what is appropriate use, not only within Belgium but also within a wider European context, in non-faith organisations such as The Future for Religious Heritage.

### Sweden: Lutheran Svenska Kyrkan

The Church of Sweden owns and manages some 3,400 church buildings, most of which are protected by the Swedish Historic Environment Act (Svenska Kyrkan, 2018). As a result, the Church receives financial assistance from the Government, through an annual ecclesiastical heritage grant of 460 million SEK (c.€45m), to cover the costs of caring for and maintaining this ecclesiastical heritage. As a result, in Sweden there have been considerable discussions on this theme, including an international conference 'Preserve, Use and Develop', organised by the Lutheran Svenska Kyrkan (Protestant Church of Sweden) in the Diocese of Lund in April 2018. This event focused on the extended use of churches (for example as event venues) to provide a resource for their local communities, whilst balancing cultural and religious values (Lindblad, 2019).

### Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Culture

Roman Catholic Canon Law (Canon 1210) states that:

*in a sacred space, only those things are to be permitted, which serve to exercise or promote worship, piety and religion; anything out of harmony with the place is forbidden. It may permit other uses in individual cases, provided they are not contrary to the sacred character of the place ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).*

In November 2018, the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Culture convened an international conference in the Vatican, formed of delegates of the episcopal conferences of Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia, along with a diverse range of observers and invited guests (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2018a; [www.cultura.va](http://www.cultura.va)). The purpose of this event was to encourage reflections through research input from

keynote speeches and poster presentations to inform and aid their deliberations in forming policy guidelines for dioceses about the proper use of decommissioned Roman Catholic Churches around the world.

The conference recognised the influence of secularisation (Davie, 2007; Bruce, 2011) in this context, combined with the impact of falling congregations and lower clergy numbers on the use and maintenance of sacred buildings, resulting in the decommissioning of a growing number of churches. This trend was previously found predominantly across Europe and North America but is now anticipated to take place elsewhere, including the former church growth areas of the Global South. As parishes have been merged and church buildings abandoned, the Roman Catholic Church required new policies and protocols for the future use of these decommissioned sacred buildings, with special consideration of their future use for other purposes.

Roman Catholic Canon Law, Canon 1210 ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) requires the conservation of religious heritage buildings and objects, supported by comprehensive inventory listings, whilst the sale of sacred relics and images is completely banned. Canon 1222 ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) recognises the alternative use of church buildings that no longer support a worshipping community, but prohibits improper activities even when the building is decommissioned as an active church. Canon Law would even prefer the literal destruction of an altar table rather than it be possibly subjected to inappropriate use, in stark contrast to heritage conservation regulations. It should be noted in this context that the Roman Catholic Church does not countenance the possibility of deconsecration.

### ***UK: The Methodist Church***

The Methodist Church concedes that some places are holier than others, relating their policy to Celtic spirituality, with reference to the concept of thin places where, in some places or spaces, the line separating the physical and the spiritual is almost non-existent (Balzer, 2013). For many years, Methodist and other non-conformist denominations have placed clauses on the use of deconsecrated churches and other buildings even stipulating to whom they may (or may not) be sold. The Methodist guidelines refer to the role of church architecture in creating or influencing a religious space as symbolic, setting a different tone from the Roman Catholic wording and theology (Jordan, 2009).

### ***England: The Church of England***

The Church of England publication, 'The Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches measure 2018', section 35, clearly delineates the responsibilities for external use of church buildings: 'the definition of duty to have regard to the church's purpose includes care of the church in its role as the local centre of worship and mission' (General Synod, 2018:17). Thus, any activities should fall in line with this guidance, including any secular use of the space as an event venue.

### **Transformation of a Church into an Event Venue: Practical and Policy Considerations**

The process of transforming a church into a venue that is of interest to an external or secular event hirer requires practical investment in a minimum threshold of facilities. A basic list includes reliable heating, provision of toilets, space for refreshments (including kitchen facilities), adequate parking, and working technical specifications (though state of the art technology would be preferable).

For a standard venue a requirement for toilets may seem to be obvious, not even worth mentioning, but the number of churches that lack even one toilet is considerable. In 2014, studies showed that only half of the Church of England's 16,000 churches had toilets on the premises (National Churches Trust, 2014). That same year the UK charity National Churches Trust provided financing for some 16 churches to install a toilet in their church premises (either in external buildings or as internal facilities). Requests for financial support made to the charity showed that in 2013, toilet installation topped the list for the third year in a row (National Churches Trust, 2014). Listed buildings are generally the least-equipped in terms of toilet provision, and provide challenges in installation (National Churches Trust, n.d.; Historic England, n.d.).

Any cost benefit analysis of such additional expenditure needs to be accurate. But although extending the use of church space can help to support the church financially, it is by no means a panacea because of the need to consider values-led event management issues. These policy concerns include:

Who will use the space and for what purpose?

What values do the venue hirers and users share with the church, and are their values compatible?

**Table 1: Model for Guidance of Churches**

Category	Considerations
<b>Policies</b>	Need to have policies in place that identify organisations and individual clients and events that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fit with the values of the church</li> <li>• Are congruent with the church's values and other activities</li> <li>• Enable flexibility of approach</li> </ul>
<b>Processes</b>	Identify who is responsible for decisions on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing</li> <li>• Management</li> <li>• Decision-making prior to and at the event</li> <li>• Funding</li> </ul> Need a process for agreeing, communicating and implementing policies
<b>Practical Resources</b>	Need to have the minimum threshold of resources required to run events, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequate toilet provision including accessible facilities, heating that works, accessible safe car parking, access to food and refreshments</li> <li>• Staff, with appropriate skills, experience and competences</li> <li>• Access to the space</li> <li>• Layout – the more flexible the better</li> <li>• Furniture that is fit for purpose, appropriate to use for non-liturgical purposes</li> <li>• Equipment that works, with technical support (e.g. sound system, AV, lighting)</li> <li>• Events management skills</li> </ul>
<b>Problems</b>	Ongoing monitoring and management of problems as they arise and identification and recording of potential solutions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What to do in case of failure or inappropriate use</li> <li>• Review event planning and management</li> <li>• Review policies and processes</li> <li>• Complete and maintain Risk Assessments and Method Statements</li> </ul>

(adapted from Dowson, 2020a:451)

Are there people, groups or organisations that churches would not wish to hire their space?

The work that has been undertaken by some denominations goes some way to address these questions, but a critical assessment of these three considerations is vital to maintaining the corporate reputation of the church as well as its theological integrity. From a practitioner perspective, Table 1 shows a model that could be followed by churches in making these decisions.

It is envisaged that church organisations could use this model to guide their deliberations in a practical way, to develop policies and procedures that will enable them to consider the appropriate extended use of their buildings.

It is clear that a church building is a very different venue from a sports stadium. However, the blurring of sacred

and secular boundaries made the Borussia Dortmund football stadium a powerful site for Christian worship on the final day of the German Kirchentag conference in 2019. In contrast, for a sacred venue to be a site for secular events it is essential to respect the differing theological perspectives within and between denominations. It remains unclear whether churches can develop a unified perspective that is also acknowledged and respected by secular users. Although the model suggested in this section goes some way towards providing practitioners with relevant processes and considerations, there is potential for future academic research in this area<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The Coronavirus pandemic that has occupied 2020 and 2021 is changing the practices not only of event venues but also of churches of all denominations. For further discussions of the impact of COVID-19 on Christianity, see Dowson (2020b).

**Figure 1: Specialist Technologies at Mega-Churches**

Source: Ruth Dowson

### Mega-Church Influences

Changes are occurring in the new buildings that are used and consecrated as churches, especially in comparison to traditional church buildings. This is evidenced by the explosion in the number of mega-churches, providing vast spaces for worship. A mega-church is defined as one that brings together over two thousand congregation members attending on a regular weekly basis (Thumma & Travis, 2007; Kurien, 2017; Gitau, 2018; Hartford Institute for Religion Research, n.d.). The databases of US mega-churches (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, n.d.) and global mega-churches (Bird, 2019) list details of the locations, multipurpose uses, and functions incorporated into the architecture. Although in the West, much public and academic discourse opines that churches are dying, there are more Christians today than five, ten, or even a hundred years ago. The US-based Pew Research Center provided statistics in 2015 that Christians comprised 31.2% of the world population, with some 2.3 billion adherents, although in what is perceived as Christianity's heartland of Europe, numbers are declining. However, Christianity is growing mostly in the Global South (Pew Research, 2015), and notably through the post-

denominational mega-church movement. According to Bird (2019), currently the biggest individual churches are based in Korea and India, with 480,000 and 190,000 weekly attendances respectively, whilst in Nigeria there are church buildings that seat 50,000 people and a development planned to build a church one-kilometre-square. In India there are plans for a one-million-seater mega-church (Bird, 2019). Christian events with more than one million people participating are often held in the open air and take place regularly across Africa and India (Dowson, 2018). The event space in mega-church buildings is not limited to a small art show. They can include very plain, no-frills meeting rooms set alongside larger spaces for Sunday worship services, being available for a variety of multiple uses mid-week. The photograph in Figure 1 shows typical facilities, which include specialist technologies: the best sound systems to support and enhance the music, singing and preaching, along with a professional light show.

This typical scene from a mega-church looks more like a secular music gig than a traditional church service. Many may see the Church of England as being traditional and set in a rather sleepy backwater of Christianity, but

it too is developing purpose-built church venues that will include event spaces. Some existing churches have built extensions costing upwards of one million pounds to create this multi-use space. In Yorkshire, the Church of England is developing a former nightclub, described as a multi-purpose flexible event space for conferences and other events. One important driver of this change towards multi-functional spaces and multi-purpose use of church buildings is that 'the Church' needs income, so as a result, the cost benefit analysis of new developments must be undertaken with rigour. Demographic and social changes in the Global North mean that fewer people attend traditional churches on a weekly basis, and where traditional congregation members are older and retired, they may have lower disposable income than people of working age. These factors converge and impact churches by reducing their income. Routine running costs are high and there are substantial one-off expenses such as upgrading the heating system because it pumps out cold air in winter, or refurbishing an antique pipe-organ. Installing a toilet and upgrading existing facilities also adds significant costs. However, bringing income into the church by becoming an event venue for part of the week may appear to present a panacea for income-

generation to many desperate congregations struggling to meet their expenses.

An example of what is deemed to be appropriate use of sacred space in a mega-church involves a fundraiser event in which adults and children model clothes that have been donated by church members. Following a professional-style catwalk fashion show with entertainment, the clothes are sold to attendees, to raise funds for international and local charities. In this instance, at the event shown in the photograph in Figure 2, over thirteen thousand pounds was raised for charities in one evening.

This UK mega-church hires out its buildings and facilities as a conference centre and event venue for much of the week and hosts its own social and other non-religious events. Along with many other contemporary mega-church buildings, it is explicitly designed to not look like a church, lacking traditional religious symbols such as a Cross, and includes a branded Starbucks coffee shop nestled within its campus estate (Dowson, 2016). In contrast, Orthodox and Catholic churches are more conventionally designed, with very strict direction on possible and appropriate uses.

**Figure 1: Mega-Church Charity Fundraiser Event, Bradford, UK**



Source: Ruth Dowson

However, in considering the influences on use of the church premises, this same mega-church refused a booking from an international sports TV channel that would have netted a quarter of its annual hire income in a 48-hour period. They did so because they felt that live coverage of a boxing match conflicted with their values, as some of their attendees had been subjected to domestic violence and abuse. So even though their theological attitude towards sacred space was ‘liberal’ in interpretation, it was still vitally important for them to consider the ethical, social and moral boundaries of behaviour within the church building – for them, there was a ‘red line’ that should not be crossed. This approach demonstrates the value to practitioners of implementing the academic model shown in Table 1, earlier.

## Applying Theological Concepts to Current Debates

This section aims to apply the theological concepts of sacred space to current debates on the extended use of church buildings. The Roman Catholic perspective is understood in this context – with the implication that secular activities should not be allowed to take place in churches. Furthermore, whatever the theological perspective church organisations hold, it is vitally important that they still consider the ethical, moral and values-laden perspectives arising from any non-religious activity that takes place.

Table 2: Excerpts from Twitter discussion on the Notre Dame fire, April 2019

- Music and art matter, but Jesus didn't spend 30 secs. suggesting his followers build buildings, and they wouldn't have had that kind of cash anyway
- Yeah, I get it. My theology tells me the same. I agree. But, there's something else at work here, something else going on, about the way we perceive things as human beings made in God's image ... but, never mind. I don't want to argue. Just sad about this.
- We know the church is the body and the beauty is in the body, not in a building. Some of the most moving worship times I've ever had were light years from the soaring spires of Notre Dame. For example, inside a max security prison in Starke, FL.; a plain brick country church in South Georgia; a friend's living room. Yet there's certainly something moving about the loss of such a majestic building, built I suppose as an expression of its founders desire to know God. The art, the history, the memory lost to the Parisian people is a great loss.
- I don't know how to explain it, but there are some older churches and traditional disciplines that help me in my walk. I feel the beauty and labour of love that went into a place in offering the very best to God. There is a place for both.
- I recall a report that UK youths who turn to Christianity from secular backgrounds (not many, but a trickle) often do so from the experience of visiting historic churches on school trips. A church (e.g., a Gothic church) is an icon: physical but pointing you toward the spiritual.
- I don't understand the 'bilateral' position some Christians are making on this topic; that beautiful church buildings are good or bad. I think everyone believes man-made music or literature can draw us closer to God, but why not architecture, especially if designed to do so?
- I'd mourn if the pyramids or the Taj Mahal or Dome of the Rock or Versailles were destroyed - doesn't mean I endorse the original purpose for which they were built. As a Baptist, I cannot begin to see how a cathedral fits into our idea of what the church is.
- I don't sacramentalize the spaces as though God is only there, but secularizing all space and removing the transcendent and making it all common seems a mistake in the other direction. God gave us bodies in space and time. Having markers to point us to Him seems appropriate.
- I'm sad that a structure of significance has been damaged but it will all perish one day. The body of Christ is the true temple of the Holy Spirit. Our history should be preserved but sacred space is where you make it.
- Nothing sacred about gift shops, tours and selling the opportunity to light a candle. God is not fooled.
- Notre Dame isn't 'just a building'... Cultural symbols act like psychological shields against death anxiety. They make us feel like we're not just perishable animals, that we're somehow more important than the spider you just squished.

(Source: Twitter)

### ***Notre Dame de Paris Fire 2019***

The fire that gutted the historic Roman Catholic Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in April 2019 shone a bright light onto the debate that is noteworthy here. A reflection on this terrible fire is relevant to this paper as the online discussions focussed on the value and relevance of sacred space, and included a wide range of theological perspectives. Utilising Twitter hashtags, it was possible to identify Tweets that demonstrate the theological differences unearthed by this tragedy (See Table 2). This research examined online discussion at the time of the fire as Parisian crowds gathered to mourn the loss of an iconic Christian heritage treasure.

Thus, the devastating fire at Note Dame Cathedral (in Paris, France) prompted much debate as to whether the church is the people or the building, and questioned whether Notre Dame was (and is) primarily a heritage site with significant religious use, or a truly spiritual place, in and of itself.

### **Perspectives on the Use of Church Buildings**

In the context of the use of churches and other sacred buildings for non-sacred events, the dualism between sacred and profane is complex in terms of theological positioning as well as in defining what is an acceptable event activity. This complexity was recognised by the Pontifical Council for Culture at their international conference in the Vatican in November 2018, which considered the issue of the use of decommissioned churches and developed guidelines to encourage local dioceses and individual churches to make decisions, taking into account their own context. Again, the academic model in Table 1 is useful here, as the Pontifical Council for Culture guidelines suggest to local Roman Catholic churches that they should consider their own individual circumstances when making such decisions.

The appropriateness of a venue for church use or using a church for a secular event impacts on the discussion about the theology of sacred space. Smith (2004) questions whether we sanctify a space by our actions. Church buildings and graveyards are intentionally consecrated, but do Eucharistic services, worship and corporate prayer also contribute to making a place sacred? Although it is clear that for some Protestants, non-denominational and post-denominational mega-church Christians (Wellman *et al.*, 2014), their theology of sacred space is very

different from traditional Roman Catholic or Orthodox theology, there still exist 'red lines' distinguishing what is and what is not acceptable activity to take place within the church building, and these issues have been discussed.

### **Centre for Theology and Community, London**

In 2017, the London-based Centre for Theology and Community published a report entitled 'Assets not burdens' (Thorlby, 2017), which urged churches to consider transforming their buildings from being financial 'burdens' by becoming potential event venue 'assets', thereby widening engagement with their local communities. In the same way that the owners of football stadia recognised that their substantial facilities were mainly in use on match days, this research acknowledged that many church activities were not confined to the traditional 'one hour on Sunday'. Whilst most of the churches surveyed did open their buildings for local community use, church halls were, on average, empty for over half the week, whilst their meeting rooms were rarely used at all. However, the Report failed to consider the impact of the values of the church, with the encouragement to, 'run events in your church, hire it out, everything will be fine'. It was perhaps the appearance of headlines suggesting that churches could bring £64,000 a year from rent (Williams, 2017), combined with inexperience in events management that led to the arrival of Chippendales look-alikes in a Prosecco event held at an English cathedral in 2018. Theodore (2018) argues persuasively that any risk assessment for religious event spaces should consider the ethical and moral risks, as well as reputational risks to the host organisation, of inappropriate or improper use.

### **Growth in Events**

The growth in events generally is influencing a trend towards the eventization of faith (Dowson 2018). The proliferation of events is influenced by the expansion of the experience economy in which consumers are moving from amassing possessions to acquiring experiences (Wood, 2009). Millennials in particular are choosing to forego the acquisition of material goods, and would prefer to share experiences, reflecting a deeper human trait. This is particularly popular with young people as they compile their bucket lists, but it also resonates with older people. Friends accept requests for 'no presents' and instead participate together in shared experiences,

such as participating in a workshop where they make something together. The increasing need for venues for events brought about a new concept, of 'venuefication' (Dowson & Lamond, 2017), which means that it is possible for any building, space or site to become a venue for an event. There are more events in society generally, hence the need for more venues; everywhere and anywhere can become an event venue. The photograph in Figure 3 shows a Christian event held during Pentecost in the purpose-built outdoor secular event space of City Square in Bradford in front of the City Hall.

The open city-centre location encourages a diverse audience in this multicultural city. The demand for venues drives a greater supply, with a wider diversity of primary functions. Hassanien and Dale (2011) evidence the developing use of non-traditional and multi-purpose venues for events, such as parks, sports grounds, beaches, concert halls and universities. Meanwhile, even the Church of England is investing in new church facilities that incorporate event space and specialist facilities to support the use of the space for religious and secular purposes. For churches and other sacred spaces, the theological perspectives discussed earlier can impact on those uses.

## Eventization of Faith

The concept of the eventization of faith reflects a trend observed in wider society (Dowson 2018; Becci, Berchardt and Casanova, 2013), as relevant both to leisure and religion. This theory encompasses traditional religious festivals as well as the branding and marketization of religious sites. Pfadenhauer (2010) coined the phrase, suggesting that the Roman Catholic Church was simply developing large events as a marketing medium, a product or tool through which to combat secularisation and to attract young people, including non-Catholics, to join the faith. The method used was to combine traditional religious festival roots with the thrill of contemporary secular music events. Crowther & Donlan (2011) established a connection between events and the creation of value in a secular marketing context, suggesting that potential exists for events to persuade, that might equally be applied to the religious arena. Other authors cite examples of religious events, especially in the area of religious tourism, religious heritage and pilgrimage studies, and whilst many do not explicitly use the term 'eventization of faith', it is clear that events play a critical role in contemporary faith-based activities and practices (Belhassen, 2009; Duff, 2009; Levi & Kocher, 2012;

**Figure 3: Public outdoor Christian event held during Pentecost, city centre, Bradford UK**



Source: Ruth Dowson

Olsen, 2008; Platt & Ali-Knight, 2018; Ron, 2009; Ron & Timothy, 2019; Shepherd, 2018; Tamma & Sartori, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2019).

Eventization may be temporary or one-off; an example of this temporary nature in a church context is the German Protestant Church's 'Kirchentag', a gathering which occurs every second year, inhabiting a city for five days, with thousands of events that together constitute the whole. In 2019 the Kirchentag was held in Dortmund, mainly based around the city's Westfalenhallen (exhibition and congress centre) and involved some 120,000 participants. The programme included large single events such as the Christian act of worship on Sunday morning almost filling the Borussia Dortmund football stadium, whilst smaller events included presentations, workshops, discussions, music events, and a well-attended dialogue between the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Regular events take place weekly, monthly or annually for both small and large numbers of people. For example, for several years a church in Leeds, Yorkshire (UK) hired the ballroom of the Met Hotel in Leeds so that some 400 people could worship together each Sunday. An example of a large annual event is the conference for Christian women held in Leeds at the First Direct Arena (capacity 13,000) with nine to ten thousand women attending in 2019. In all these examples, church organisations are using secular spaces for a religious purpose, thereby incorporating secular venues in sacred events.

## Examples of Churches

This research has involved visits to over 50 churches in seven countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden and England). These buildings belong to different denominations, from Roman Catholic to Lutheran, and Anglican to independent non-denominational churches. They include ancient churches, and traditional churches, from medieval to Victorian, and purpose-built modern churches complete with event space, as well as decommissioned and deconsecrated church buildings. The overall theme of their extended use is for events, whether constrained by Canon Law or steered by bishops' guidelines. Figure 4 shows photographs taken by the researcher in some of the churches visited. These images demonstrate that churches are used for a wide range of events.

The photographs give a flavour of the range of uses for events. It is notable that some churches have been 'reordered', with significant physical changes made to layout and additional facilities added to provide a more effective commercial event space. In addition, Table 3 outlines details of further examples of churches visited, from a range of countries and denominations, currently in use for purposes in addition to or instead of religious services.

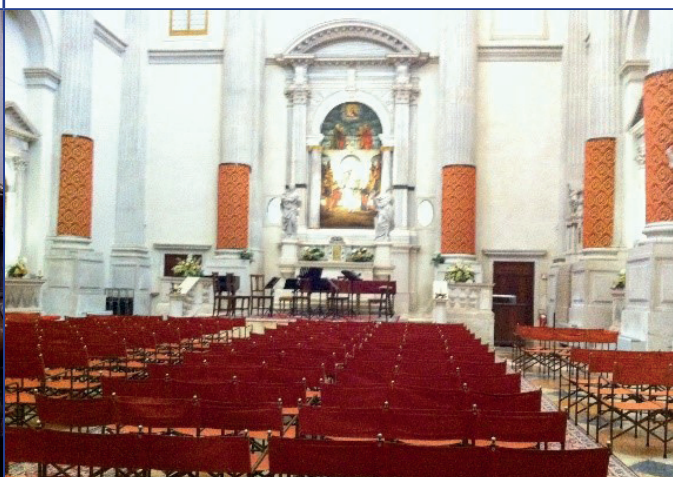
The range of purposes for the extended use of these churches, some of which are deconsecrated or decommissioned, is broad, and includes conversion to other purposes, such as a museum. However, all include the hosting of events in their current use, whether restricted to a certain type of event or not.

**Figure 4: Churches in use for events (All photos taken by and copyright Ruth Dowson)**

Hamburg, Germany – Kirchentag Conference, Organ Recital, 2013



Chiesa di San Maurizio, Venice, Italy – set up for a piano recital



**Figure 4(cont.): Churches in use for events (All photos taken by and copyright Ruth Dowson)**

Leeds, West Yorkshire, England – Decommissioned Church – Selling charity Christmas cards in the chancel



Christ Church Skipton, North Yorkshire, England – church reordered to enhance events facilities



St John the Evangelist, Clayton, Bradford, West Yorkshire, England – Dickensian Market Day and Christian concert

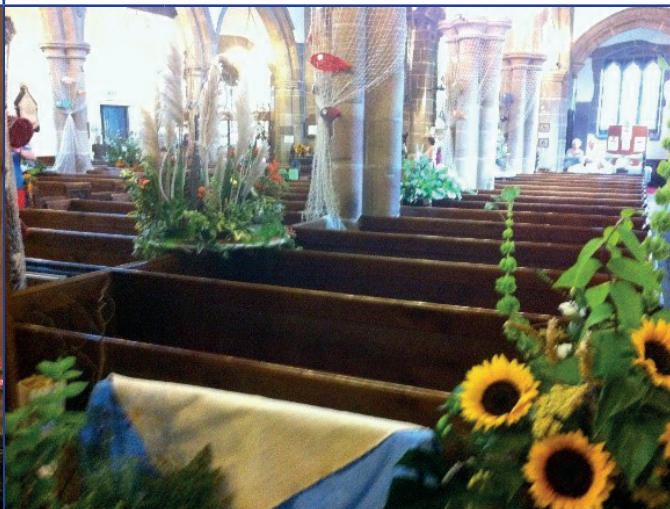


**Figure 4(cont.): Churches in use for events (All photos taken by and copyright Ruth Dowson)**

All Saints Bingley, West Yorkshire, England – Christmas Tree Festival



Holy Trinity Skipton, North Yorkshire, England – Flower Festival



Near Lund, Sweden – Decommissioned Church, reordered and marketed as an event venue. Note the altar area is being used to serve drinks (including alcohol), and the installation of sound and lighting equipment.



Berlin, Germany – Kirchentag Conference, Discussion and Music event with Eucharist, 2017



**Figure 4(cont.): Churches in use for events (All photos taken by and copyright Ruth Dowson)**

Bradford Cathedral, West Yorkshire, England – Launch of Art Exhibition

**Table 3: Examples of historic churches and their uses (from Researcher visits)**

Country	Denomination and Church	Description	Alternative uses
Germany	Roman Catholic Church of SS Peter, Paul and Ursula, Naundorf	Romanesque stone building from the early 13th century	Music events with the church organ
Germany	Roman Catholic Church of St. Peter, Osmünde	Large western tower collapsed leading to restoration of the building by the church council with supporting association	Community events
Germany	Roman Catholic Church of SS Anna and Katharina, Landsberg-Guetz	The original choir windows were restored through filling of missing parts by modern contemporary glass designed by the artist Markus Lueperz	Music and community events
Germany	Lutheran Church of St. Michael, Brachstedt	The rectangular west tower built of rough stone mainly in the 12th century	Music events for organ and flute and community events
Germany	Lutheran Parish Church of St Mary, Marburg	Romanesque church replaced by Gothic building, in memory of Elizabeth von Thuringen (St Elizabeth) 1297	Pilgrimage destination and cultural events
Hungary	Roman Catholic Pannonhalma Archabbey	Benedictine monastery built in 996	Tourist destination and event space, vineyard with winery
Italy	Roman Catholic Chiesa di San Maurizio, Venice, Italy	16 <sup>th</sup> Century deconsecrated church – set up for a piano recital	Museum and venue for Baroque music events
Netherlands	Roman Catholic Catharijneconvent, Utrecht	Medieval friary	National Museum of Christian art culture and history, event space

## Conclusion

This paper has considered the impacts for churches of the increasing number of events in society, which has driven a need for more venues. Churches, along with many other spaces that have a primary function that is not 'events', are drawn in to providing event space for a range of users and event types. All secondary or hybrid venues should consider the potential impact of this activity on their own organisation and reputation. However, churches have additional layers of complexity in such discussions, which are the aspects of spirituality and the appropriate use of sacred space. These considerations will vary according to the theological position of the church and its context. Such nuances have been recognised by the Vatican, which is encouraging, but the discussion needs to be more widespread to avoid embarrassment.

Davies (1968) and Turner (1979) have independently built on the historical biblical context to provide in-depth studies of the development and use of church buildings over 2000 years, and their uses for sacred and secular purposes. A gap in research would be filled by completing an updated study, encompassing the evolution of design and purposes of church buildings from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, for religious, non-religious and tourism activities.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed an expansion of extended use of church buildings for purposes beyond sacred worship, liturgy and pastoral offices (weddings, funerals and baptisms). The explosive growth of mega-churches with their multifunctional campuses has coincided with the dominance of events in all areas of life (at least up to the 2020 pandemic). The complex theological differences that have emerged between and within denominations add to the importance of this topic for researchers. It seems unlikely that more traditional / catholic churches will move from their perspectives of what constitutes sacred space (which are guided by canon law). However, it appears that some of those churches which are exploring more commercial avenues, are learning, by trial and error, what activity is acceptable and what is not. Even in traditional churches, the impact of mass tourism in sacred spaces can appear unseemly, such as the crowds in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem. The inevitable closure of some traditional church buildings, particularly in the Global North, has resulted, in part, from demographic shifts and the blossoming of newer independent churches around the world. This trend has necessitated theological

consideration of the allowable uses of decommissioned and deconsecrated churches. The policy guidelines that are emerging are of relevance to the extended use of all churches for non-sacred purposes.

The future use of church buildings has been a subject of political interest as well as promoting the protection of religious heritage spaces. This is likely to continue, with the publication of agreed guidelines, and international pan-denominational discussion forums where learning from others' experience offers valuable insights. A key motivating factor for many churches has been the potential for increasing their income by extending the utilisation of their space outside of usual worship services. However, this avenue should not be seen as a panacea, as it comes with threshold requirements for facilities, as well as potential for problems. The transformation of a church into an event venue is being promoted by some organisations as a panacea for financial concerns. However, this paper strongly argues that such intentions should be developed only after thoughtful (and prayerful) consideration of the possible adverse outcomes, including reputational risk, and wear and tear damage to priceless and often irreplaceable religious heritage treasures. This paper suggests a model that could help individual churches and denominations to develop policies and processes, obtain practical resources, and identify and mitigate risks and potential problems that might result.

The growth of mega-churches and the impact of continuing to worship during a pandemic are influencing changes in building design, facilities and purpose. Lockdowns during the pandemic have pushed more churches into providing virtual services, whether pre-recorded or live-streamed online using a range of social media platforms. Previously, mega-churches (and those with mega-church aspirations) chose to live-stream or broadcast their services and special events. By the end of 2020, many churches have either moved wholly online (especially in lockdown times), or embraced a hybrid approach, that is unlikely to reduce, once the pandemic is over. This trend requires greater sophistication of sound and visual technology onsite, as well as reliable WIFI and confident (and even professional?) technical support. Professional suppliers such as the German-based speaker manufacturers, d&b audiotechnik, are supplying houses of worship – large and small – with the technical requirements they need in this emerging world.

Accidents such as the April 2019 fire that gutted Notre Dame de Paris, trigger theological debate, but also question developments that encourage and encompass appropriate event spaces, resources and technology within the new build.

This paper builds on the development of the concept of the eventization of faith. The paper researches the breadth and diversity of events that are held in church buildings, encompassing religious events, non-religious events, as well as tourism activities. The nature of eventization may be temporary or one-off; it may be regular, or a series of multiple events; and it may include the use of sacred spaces and non-sacred spaces for events, with explicit and implicit religious and non-religious purposes. Theological perspectives influence what is acceptable activity, and who are acceptable users, and these vary widely between denominations.

Care needs to be taken in developing policies and procedures which ensure that potential hirers are aware of the sacred nature of the space, as well as of the values of the church organisation and its stakeholders. Churches should discuss what their theological, ethical, moral and social boundaries are in this area of activity. There is a threshold minimum of quality and facilities (including toilets and heating) that churches should ensure, assessing the cost versus the benefit. Churches must therefore, consider how to develop and maintain a sustainable approach to venue management, especially during the pandemic and post-COVID19. In tandem with this, churches should consider their own position on sacred space and identify what groups and activities are acceptable, and what are not appropriate.

As a result of this research discussion, this paper makes a range of proposals to the academy and to the practitioner.

#### **Proposals for the Academy on future research:**

- The concept of the 'eventization of faith' is being developed, and this should continue.
- The impact on life during and after the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainable use of churches as venues for events.
- The theology of sacred space impacting on the changing use of churches for 'extended use'.
- The effective management of church events post COVID-19.

- Comparative application to other faiths, including theological similarities and differences.
- The practice and theology of Orthodox churches in this area, for comparison with that identified in Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity.

#### **Proposals to practitioners:**

- Churches hiring out their space for events should use their local context to aid decisions.
- Churches should clarify their values with prospective hirers.
- Churches should develop policies and processes, and ensure they have skills and experience in events management to ensure safe events.
- Potential clients / hirers of church buildings should consider whether the proposed event activity is compatible with the values of the venue and its stakeholders.

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