



From meeting house to megachurch

Buildings for the post-Christendom church

By N. Vernon Blankenship

In his book, *Discontinuity and Hope*, Lyle Schaller states: “that while there was considerable continuity in American Christianity between 1800 and 1960, the past four decades of Christianity in America has been marked by an unprecedented degree of discontinuity.” That means there has been more radical change in the last 40 years than in the previous 150 years.

The 40s, 50s and 60s were years of a dramatic increase in church building to make up for a period of economic depression and war time. After World War II, because of the increasing cost of building the classical type monumental church buildings, there was a move to more contemporary, less expensive type structures. This was a time when multi-purpose buildings were being built for new congregations, and educational buildings were added because of the increasing attendance.

In the 70s there were pioneering churches willing to develop such new buildings. They were willing to experiment with movable seating and movable furnishings so that the room could be rearranged for different types of services and occasions. In the 80s and 90s there was a rise in the number of large independent and regional churches (often called megachurches) that became center stage for church growth. Megachurches have also brought a new scale to the size of church structures.

They tend to be large theatrical type auditoriums with few of the traditional symbols and trappings of the mainline churches.

Decline or Growth?

The decline of mainline congregations was a concern in the 70s, 80s

and 90s. Scholars had begun to call this the post-Christian era, and one where Christendom as we have known it is dying. Douglas John Hall states it this way in his book, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*.

“To say that Christianity in the world at large is undergoing a major transition is to indulge in understatement. What is happening is nothing less than the winding down of a process that was inaugurated in the fourth century of the common era . . . Although some semblance of Christendom may

A note from the editor

N. Vernon Blankenship started *Cutting Edge* in 1972 and was its editor for 21 years. On March 27 of this year, I sat at my desk and cried when I heard that Vernon had died early that morning. The Church had lost a servant and I had lost a colleague, friend and mentor. Vernon had struggled with ALS for five years. Despite his ever worsening condition, he continued to be one of the best read, most forward thinking persons I have known in the area of church programming and facility trends.

About six months before his death, Vernon sent me an 11 page

manuscript and told me to use it as I saw fit. The content, like Vernon, challenges “the way we’ve always done it” and helps us to see possibilities. I’ve edited the manuscript for publication here.

In his ministry at Board of Church Extension, Vernon made more than 3,000 visits to congregations to help with building and capital needs, raising more than \$32 million in fund raising campaigns. He retired in 1993. It is with thanksgiving for his life and ministry that I dedicate this issue of *Cutting Edge* to his honor and memory.

— Ryan D. Hazen

find a new home in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, its period of Western dominance is over.”

Students of church growth also warn that the church in America must change its approach and strategy if it is to reach growing numbers. In his recent book entitled *Moving Off the Map*, Thomas Bandy states the situation in this crisis language. He talks about the death of Christendom:

“This is not a theoretical death of Christendom. It is a real death of Christendom ... unless ... unless the Christian congregations in North America change. The same period can be a window of opportunity to transform the church into a new species of Christian community that can flourish in the twenty-first century.”

Bandy’s recommendations—along with William Easum—are that congregations must develop new forms of church life and strategy in place of the old bureaucratic “program type congregations” that are dominated by clergy. They accentuate the importance of teaching ministries by clergy and lay-led small group ministries.

On the other hand, there are voices which claim that we are beginning a new period of growth and participation. In Lyle Schaller’s book, *The New Reformation*, subtitled *Tomorrow Arrived Yesterday*, he confesses that while he was focusing on renewal of the old he failed to see that a new reformation was well underway. He lists the following signs of the new reformation:

- a new era in Christian music;
- the change in public worship from a dull and boring weekly obligation to an appealing and exciting worship experience;
- the adoption of market driven planning to replace tradition-oriented planning in congregations;
- the change from asking the laity to “pray and pay” for missions

to challenging the laity to be fully involved in doing missions;

- the huge number of books on the bestseller lists that carry a clear religious message (one bookseller commented, “The laity come in and buy books on spirituality while the pastors buy books on church administration and on computers”);

- perhaps most important of all, the decision by tens of millions of teenagers and adults to place a high personal priority on weekly participation in serious, in-depth, lay-led, and continuing Bible study and prayer groups.

Schaller concludes that “while far from a complete list, those are some of the signs that the new reformation is well underway.”

Church Buildings for the Twenty-first Century

Now what does all of this have to say about church buildings for the twenty-first century? Changes don’t happen overnight in church life or church buildings. However, there is a call and urgency about the need for change. The congregations and their denominations should seek to understand their mission and pursue needed changes. Many buildings need to be replaced now. At least half of existing church buildings are out

of date or not effective tools for today’s mission. At least a third of the church buildings need to be relocated to a larger site in a place where people can find them.

The automobile has made neighborhood churches obsolete. People will drive to find what they want. The popularity of the larger churches is not necessarily a popularity for bigness. This generation wants “choices, convenience, a strong customer orientation, quality, and specialized services.” (Schaller, *New Reformation*.) They are also looking for the same choices in their religious life. Therefore, the large regional congregation can meet their needs for variety and quality that many small congregations cannot. This will mean larger land sites than the five acre site that was believed adequate 40 years ago. The advice for a new congregation or a relocated congregation is to get as much acreage as possible.

Congregations of the past have built significantly expensive buildings on a location that they assumed would be the permanent location. Therefore, they had a problem when they needed to relocate. In today’s missionary environment, a congregation needs to be located in the midst of its mission field. It



Celebration Community Church, a new church start in Hays, Kansas, recently purchased a trucking company building on a hill at an interchange of Interstate 70. Joe Gardner, BCE consulting architect from Atlanta, Georgia, helped the congregation visualize this renovation to transform the building into a new church home. If the congregation’s ministry changes and a move is needed, the building will be marketable for a variety of uses.p

should not build with the expectation that the church will be located in this place forever. The properties and the building are only tools of ministry and should be disposable if the

“The properties and the building are only tools of ministry and should be disposable if the strategy of the church requires it.”

– N. Vernon Blankenship

strategy of the church requires it. Church buildings should be commercially saleable because of the rapid changes in demographics and travel routes. I have known churches that had to relocate three times within 20 years. After 18 years of life, the Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, which boasts ten thousand people in its weekly services, had moved more than a dozen times before building its present facilities.

If Christendom is dead, then the monumental structures that symbolize its power and triumphalism should be replaced. Churches of the past were intentionally monumental. There was never any doubt that the building was a church because no other community organization would choose to be housed in such a building. In a sense, churches deliberately chose not to own marketable properties because they assumed their organizations would never die and that their ministries would never become irrelevant. They lay claim to being the center of spiritual and moral life in the community, regardless of subsequent demographic shifts. Ecclesiastical architecture, by its very nature,

proclaims the belief of the church that people will and must come to them in the end.

Now, in the infancy of the twenty-first century, we must admit that there has been a decline of Christian influence since the Enlightenment. Secularism and pluralism of our day have changed the demographic and cultural environment. We now live in a missionary era and the church must adjust its life to being a missionary organization rather than as a triumphal establishment of power.

Bandy states that we are coming

into a “pre-Christian” era. Generally speaking, church facilities of the pre-Christian era proclaim a bias for diversity, creativity, and initiative through utilitarian architecture. There is nothing churchy about them. This is not to say that they will not be attractive. Nor is this to say that Christian symbolism will not be vital—it will simply be portable. Church facilities will above all be useful, adaptable and marketable. In the pre-Christian era, the church will not expect people to come to it but will be prepared to go to the people. They will be ready to sell their

The Church Building of the Future?

Thomas Bandy describes in some detail the type of space he foresees for church buildings of the twenty-first century. While these descriptions sound rather grandiose and idealistic, any church of any size can incorporate the principles in their buildings.

The church of the future could incorporate these three features:

- 1 Symbolism, vision, and mission:** Symbols will communicate to the public everything they need to know about this particular congregation in a simple graphic or a well-chosen phrase. The accumulation of baggage (artifacts, memorials, old curricula, and objects that have outlived their usefulness for contemporary mission) will be severely restricted.
- 2 Multiple options supported by up-to-date technologies:** The church facility will be easily adapted to any emerging need or task—and to simultaneous, distinct tasks. In order to do this, church facilities will be oriented around three basic circles of space:
 - **Worship Center:** Versatile space for drama and dance, small and large groups, and music and movement. Supported by surround-sound, abundant microphones, computer terminals, video screens, and adjustable lighting.
 - **Conversation Court:** Immediately adjacent to, and half the size of, the worship center.
 - **Child Care Center:** Immediately adjacent to the conversation court, with no steps and security access. Divided for infants and toddlers, and equipped with the same standards of quality as the best day care in the community.

These (church facilities) of the future will have additional space for education, sports, small groups, food preparation, and other activities, which will constantly be reshaped to support the changing ministries on the ministry map.

- 3 Personal security, safety, and accessibility.** The church facility will exceed the municipal codes for accessibility and safety. All areas indoors and outdoors will be brightly illuminated and free from hazards. The church office will be able to monitor access to the building. (Bandy, *Moving Off the Map*.)

property, carry their symbols with them, and relocate to a more effective place of ministry. In the twenty-first century, architecture and tradition are secondary. All that matters is the Gospel—and nothing else! (Bandy, *Moving Off the Map*.)

This may be revolutionary thought for some people who want to have the tallest spire in the city or beautiful stained glass windows in their Gothic type structure. Church buildings must still encompass the best in beauty and function. A worship room that is built for flexibility of usage can be built with character and have the qualities that assist us in our Christian worship and fellowship.

Form Follows Function

A building is designed to house a particular function and its form should enable that function. We have many older buildings built in another era that are unable to serve people well today. Therefore, as we begin to plan new buildings for the twenty-first century, we need to take a fresh look at the church's mission and design buildings that will help it perform these purposes, not impress

society. They must be aesthetically pleasing buildings, well-designed by capable architects. They should be utilitarian in nature, flexible in their adaptability and hospitable in their appearance.

As I stated earlier, church buildings and church practices cannot be changed overnight. First, there is the heavy investment of dollars in buildings that makes it difficult for congregations to move. Second, there is the weight of tradition that makes change go slowly for most religious groups. There will be no radical sudden change. Many congregations will continue on for the next generation or two without making major changes. There is the tendency to deny necessity to change. However, the facts of life tell us every day that our culture and our society have changed radically in the last 50 years.

We live in a society that continues to change and there is a necessity for the church to be willing to change in order to reach people in the twenty-first century. The churches will need to provide ministries to meet the needs of people, provide excellence in

leadership, build up-to-date facilities, and utilize technologies to communicate the Gospel.

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Many have asked about ways to honor Vernon. The Blankenship family has requested memorials be given to the BCE N. Vernon Blankenship Named Fund for Accessibility, the Building Fund of Twin Pines Christian Church, Lexington, Kentucky or the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association.

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