

The Church Has Left the Building

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, THE UNITED METHODIST CONGREGATION MY husband pastors lost its building to fire. In the days and weeks that followed, our mantra was “the church is not a building; the church is the people.” It is easy to affirm and believe that statement, theologically correct as it is, but it is a lot harder to behave as if it were true.

“The church was struck by lightning,” we would say. Or, “We’re meeting here until we rebuild the church.” Sometimes, we would catch ourselves in that slip of the tongue and say, “I mean, the church *building*,” but other times, it went by unnoticed, so ingrained is that “church-as-building” mind-set.

What do you picture when you hear the word “church”? What do the people of your congregation picture? How would our congregations be different if we really lived as though “church” was a gathering of people worshiping and serving God, defined by its actions and its spirit, rather than by its address?

Inspired by the denomination’s Rethink Church campaign, this issue explores how people across the connection can *be* the church, not just go to church. We can be the church by reaching out to people long separated from organized religion, as Derrick-Lewis Noble explains. We can help children experience God through Creation, as Leanne Hadley does in her ministry with preschoolers. We can stop pretending to know all the answers and be transparent with our doubts, as retired pastor Buzz Stevens wishes he had been. We can get outside the church’s walls altogether to spread a message of hope to incarcerated women, like Becca Stevens and the women of Magdalene.

Buildings provide a home base for countless ministries of the church, not the least of which is a place to gather for corporate worship. The church itself, however, will not be defined by the height of its steeple but the reach of its compassion, not the number of seats but the number of lives changed, not the shape of the doors but the disciples that pass through them as they head out into the world to make a difference in Jesus’ name.

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