

something even better

by Dr. Doug Hammack, Sr. Pastor, North Raleigh Community Church

A few years ago, I was excommunicated from the denomination that ordained me. I wrote a book. They didn't approve.

In their defense, it was an unsettling book. Wrestling with the exodus of young people from church, it was an attempt to tell the Christian story to their worldview. That made it tough for folks not living in that worldview.

So, I was kicked out. And our church, voting to stay together, was kicked out too. For us, that meant we lost our building. It was a crisis; we were orphaned and homeless at the same time. The folks at Temple, Raleigh, heard about our plight. They invited us to share their campus. With enough space for both of us, we arranged a rental agreement.

Crisis averted. That's how it started. A rental agreement to avert a crisis. But it turns out, we've stumbled into something even better.



Renting became Relationship. Temple is a pretty traditional church. We're pretty untraditional. Together, we're learning "oneness that is not sameness." Dr. Mike Parnell (Temple's Sr. Pastor) has become a good friend. I swing by his office each Sunday morning to chat before we lead our respective services. Our churches potluck together. We do service projects together. We do a few Sundays together each year. We both enjoy the energy of a full building, babies and grandmas all together. Together really is greater than the sum of the parts.

This couldn't have happened if Temple had only been interested in rental income. From the start, they made it clear they wanted relationship with us. After our troubles, we were distrustful and a little stand-off-ish. But older and wiser than us, they were patient, kind, and loving. They accepted us with our untraditional idiosyncrasies. They made relationship possible. In the years to come, it is our deep hope to be as supportive and strengthening of them, as they have been of us.



Reimagining Church Buildings. During our crisis, we imagined renting a while, saving up, and buying our own building. It's what churches do. In hindsight, if we had done that, the pressure to raise money would have undercut the work we're doing to rethink church. Our relationship with Temple has fundamentally shifted my thinking, not just for us but for the way churches do space.

Two things true of the American Church today ...

We own a lot of buildings. I read recently we own between \$300-\$500 billion in property.¹ That's a lot of space. A lot of rooms.

The American church is in decline. The way we do church doesn't work for a lot of people. That leaves a lot of our buildings underused.

From a historical perspective, this isn't a horrible thing. We tend to lose our way through the centuries. But we also tend to find it again. Like a tree, our tradition gets blight from time to time. When it does, we are chopped down and consigned to the fire. But from the stump, a shoot of new life always emerges. It is our way to lose our way. It is also our way to find it again when we do.

All over the nation, we are. We are finding our way again. New thinking, new experiments in spiritual community, and new ways of imagining our Christian narrative are all helping us find our way again.

Our own community's positive experience sharing space with Temple has awakened my imagination for how the American Church might support these new experiments, this new Reformation. Instead of resisting radical experiments in rethinking Church, we could do what Temple did. We could share. We could support.

In the last Reformation, we burnt one another at the stake. I think Temple's approach is better.



¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeff-schweitzer/robert-jeffress-romney_b_1002753.html