

The place of buildings in the mission of the Church of Scotland: The need for a theology of the built environment

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Abstract

Church sanctuaries are a vital asset in the work of the Church of Scotland, helping to initiate and sustain faith. A sanctuary helps define a congregation's self-understanding and the features of a church building have a pedagogic function. Church buildings are significant too, in the spiritual life of the wider community. They are the material instantiation of the Kirk's commitment to be present in each locality, providing a focal point for the expression of spiritual needs and the offering of care. They also testify to God's presence in a location and to values that transcend those of everyday life.



In this essay, I wish to suggest that church buildings, by which I mean sanctuaries, are an integral, even essential part of the ministry of the Kirk, valuable from a spiritual, missional and anthropological perspective. This means, that the closure of church buildings will often, all things being equal, have a detrimental effect on the mission of the Church, though this may be an unavoidable cost. Moreover, the way in which we relate to our buildings says something important, for good or ill, about our own spirituality. Consequently, we need to think theologically about our buildings and our decisions about our churches need to be informed by such thinking. The future of our buildings, including how they are reshaped and used is a theological as well as a practical question. It really

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isn't good enough for the Kirk to make momentous decisions about its built inheritance purely on utilitarian grounds. The Kirk needs a theology of buildings!

My thesis rests on observations about the role of church buildings in the faith life of congregations and communities. The key point is that faith is only partially sustained by discursive practices – preaching, Bible studies, etc. – and that buildings play an important role in the shaping and sustaining of the religious life. Moreover, buildings are the material instantiation of the Kirk's claim to be the provider of the 'the ordinances of religion' in every parish.¹ They are, we might say, an essential part of the Church's self-understanding.

Before I come to the case, let me clear away some possible misunderstandings. There is no argument that sometimes dispensing with buildings is necessary. There will be a number of factors to take into account in these decisions, including: the number of church buildings in a locality, the demographics of a local area, the state of church fabric, whether a building has architectural and/or historic significance, whether a building is suited to the needs of contemporary forms of worship, whether a building can be used flexibly, the availability of funds locally, and the place of a building in the life of the local community. Moreover, there is often a cogent case for reordering buildings to render them more flexible, comfortable, accessible and economical. There seems to be no merit in preserving all the forms of the past merely for sentimental reasons. Though, as Whyte points out, the debates around the reordering of churches, both past and present, have theological content and implications that ought to be recognised and weighed in decision making.² For instance, it could be argued that the rush to make our churches 'just like home' may well lead to the attenuation of their distinctive, ecclesial function, which is to do with evoking serious reflection.

Secondly, in arguing for a more considered approach to our buildings, I am concerned, not only with buildings of architectural or historical significance, but with all church buildings. The difference between the

¹ "The Constitution", in *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, ed. James L. Weatherhead (Edinburgh: Board of Practice and Procedure, 1997), 20.

² William Whyte, "The Ethics of the Empty Church: Anglicanism's Need for a Theology of Architecture", *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 2 (November 2015): 178.



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architecturally meritorious and others is, for the purpose of this paper, one of degree and not of kind.

Thirdly, my concern here is not with the process of grieving that congregations go through when their building is earmarked for closure. The emotional trauma that congregants endure when a well-loved, familiar place of worship is closed is, no doubt, acute and this is a pastoral issue that needs to be addressed. My concern here, however, is with the bigger question of the theological and missiological value of our buildings.

Fourthly, my comments are directed towards the significance of sanctuaries. There is a parallel discussion to be had about the selling of manses and other church properties, but this falls outside of the perimeters of this paper.

Fifthly, I am concerned here only with the Church of Scotland. My interest is with the role of buildings in a church that has a self-declared role as the church of the nation.

The General Trustees of the Kirk have, for some years now, been arguing that there is a need to dispense with many church buildings. In a recent meeting, one national church leader suggested that the aim was a reduction of around 40%. The case, such as it is, rests on the well-known statistics of congregational and vocational decline, the superabundance of buildings in some places and the perceived archaic state of many of the church's buildings.³ Many are said to be inflexible, uncomfortable, uneconomical, badly maintained and ill-suited to modern worship. The argument for closures is underpinned by a pragmatic view of the value of our buildings. According to this way of thinking, ecclesiastical buildings, baldly stated, are no more than walls within which to meet and therefore they can be dispensed with, without significant spiritual or missional loss. Indeed, it is often suggested that the missional activities of the church require and will be enhanced by the closure of many churches. As the

³ Sometimes, the perceived super-abundance of buildings is put down to the 'sins of the fathers', which is seen, in some way, as justifying closure. I find this a risible argument, ignoring the energy and creativity released by the divisions of the past, albeit there were downsides. The Disruption, for instance, could be seen as an instance of creative destruction. The argument also seems to make the odd assumption that some buildings are perpetually guilty by association, which is vulnerable to the reductio, that it is difficult to see that there are any buildings that are totally free of such associations, so that no buildings are safe. Perhaps even buildings are saved by grace!



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Chair of the General Trustees said at the 2021 General Assembly, ‘The Church has too many buildings, too many of poor quality and too many in the wrong place’. He bewailed the fact that only 1% of churches had been sold off in the preceding 10 years, before going on to assert that, ‘We need to get real’, by which he meant, the Kirk needed, ‘Fewer, but well-equipped places in the right places.’⁴ It’s disappointing that in church forums, marketing clichés sometimes stand in for proper, reasoned arguments. For, in my view, there are good reasons, all things being equal, to retain as many church buildings as possible and, in particular, to avoid leaving whole communities, however small, without a sanctuary.

My case rests on the sense that church buildings play a significant role in initiating and sustaining faith. The built environment fulfils both explicit and tacit functions. The role of a Victorian church, such as the one of which I am the minister, clearly has the explicit function of providing a space for worshippers and others to gather. This is almost the sole concern of recent discussions in the Kirk, with the emphasis being on the flexibility, comfort, etc. of the ‘estate’. However, the significance of a church building is not exhausted by this purpose. For a church building is itself a message in stone and mortar, a petrified witness to the Gospel for those within and outside of a congregation.⁵ A church building has the potential to evoke deep emotions that both orient people to faith and nurture its development. It is through these tacit functions, that an ecclesiastical building plays an important educative and missiological role. In this regard, a sanctuary has a two-fold role: firstly, in relation to the active congregation and secondly, in relation to the wider community in which it is set.



The role of the church building in the faith life of the congregation

A church building is not simply the context of a congregation’s life, but an integral part of the activities and self-identity of the group, such that the closure of a building can lead to a significant rupture in their religious identity.

⁴ “Report of the General Trustees, General Assembly 2021”, <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/general-assembly/general-assembly-2021/video-highlights/>.

⁵ Whyte, 182.



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To unfold this point it is useful to begin with a reminder of the importance of physical interaction in people's faith life. One thinker who reflected on this, was the twentieth-century Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, who was keenly interested in the role of Christianity in the modern world. Macmurray hailed from a deeply religious family and, though his faith perspective changed radically over the years, he remained committed throughout to, what he called, the 'reality' of religion. By this he meant the significance of religion, and most especially Christianity, to the realisation of the full potential of humanity, which he defined by the concept of friendship. For Macmurray, the function of Christianity is to create, sustain and develop communities of friendship. In this, the doctrines and contemplative practices of the faith are important. But, most important of all are liturgical rituals, for the actions and words used in worship symbolise and reinforce the common life that people share, nurturing their feeling of belonging to one community of friendship, which is in principle open to all. Rituals are important because they go beyond mere ideas and draw people into meaningful, practical interaction with each other.⁶

Macmurray's approach, which has undertones of Durkheim, provides a clue to the role of buildings in nurturing or inhibiting faith. Just as, for him, the development of the attitudes and feelings of faith is tied to physical participation in the rituals of a religion, so, we might argue, when worshippers gather in a church building, the tacit communication implicit in religious ritual is reinforced by a built context which is consonant with that message. Contrariwise, a non-religious building may provide, at best, a neutral venue for ritual practice and, at worst, a space that instantiates dissonant values.⁷

Underlying this point is the observation that the religious life is only partially sustained by discursive practices such as sermons and Bible studies. Human behaviour, including religious practice, is shaped by bodily forces such as affect and desire that cut across the discourse of

⁶ Adam Hood, "From Idealism to Personalism: Caird, Oman and Macmurray", in *The History of Scottish Theology*, vol. III, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 89.

⁷ Recently I came across an independent church in London, which was located in a redundant cinema. It raised, for me, the question as to whether the Gospel can ever be quite at home in a building so clearly erected as a place of leisure and commercial gain.



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reason and rational assessment. Such affects are not irrational, for they are an intrinsic part of our humanity, but they do pose a challenge to churches who base their plans on the assumption of a naïve, intellectualist understanding of human motivation.

To tease out further the relationship of buildings to faith, it is helpful to consider ‘Spatial Theory’. Thinkers such as Barclay point out that there is a distinction to be drawn between location and place. Whilst a location can be pointed to on a map, a place is a richer concept, a location that is the focus of ‘symbolic and imaginary investments’ on the part of a group.⁸ A location is intersubjective, because it is a physical given, whereas a place is socially constructed, so that whether a location is a place will depend on who one asks. For one person, a building may be ‘home’, for another it has no particular symbolic meaning. The analysis of ‘place’ is complex, but suffice to say that the architecture, furnishings and setting of the location are an integral part of its symbolic meaning.

Thinking of churches as places can help us to see the complex role of buildings in faith. Spatial theory emphasises the way in which ‘human behaviour is produced in relationship with material conditions and the surrounding environment’.⁹ What this means when we consider churches, is that buildings (location) are part of the matrix that go to make up the faith life of a congregation and community. A building is not simply a location in which to meet, for it enters inextricably into the dialogue of practice, value and environment that constitutes the life of a congregation. This may be why the closure of a building is often traumatic. It is, because the building becomes an essential part of a community’s self-understanding; a spiritual home, which evokes deep feelings and has been invested with meanings that go far beyond it just being a location for meeting. Perhaps, too, this explains why, when a building is closed, worshippers often drift away from the Church. Maybe these people leave, because their faith is closely tied to the life of a particular place. The closure of their church ruptures their experience of faith, for ‘it is the product of shared experience within a particular aesthetic setting’.¹⁰ In such situations, it is of little consequence to explain the logic of church

⁸ Katie Barclay, “Space and Place”, in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. Susan Broomhall (London: Routledge, 2017), 20.

⁹ Barclay, 21.

¹⁰ Whyte, 181.



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closure to recalcitrant members, since, as suggested above, the religious life is only partially determined by discursive practices.

The description of the role of buildings in faith is not only a sociological truism, but one which is consistent with the fundamental Christian belief that the spiritual life is grounded in things we can see, touch, hear and taste. Christianity, we might say, embraces a materialist spirituality.¹¹ From this perspective, faith is embodied in the ‘concrete spaces’ provided by the church and the world, which are distinct though interrelated domains, and it is expressed in these spaces through physical engagements, including simple acts of worship and virtuous conduct. Particularly important in this regard is the sacramental encounter with God in Christ through the Spirit. This is mediated by material things: Holy Communion, baptism and preaching, as well as through other dimensions of the church’s liturgy. The theological affirmation here is that, from an incarnational viewpoint, God is encountered in and through the physical world and that the same Spirit who is at work in the Church also shapes the life of the world. There is, from this perspective, continuity between God’s acts of creation and redemption, for redemption is the renewing of the created order.

Implicit in this approach is the rejection of understandings of piety that are overly interiorised. Whilst the material and the spiritual are not to be confused – that is a form of naturalism – yet neither are they to be improperly divided. Through the material, we do truly engage with the divine Word, will and presence. To use John Baillie’s term, there is a ‘mediated immediacy’. In hearing, touch, sight and taste we encounter the triune God whose activity aims at the redemption of the whole creation, and the encounter with God in the sacraments and preaching provides a paradigm for understanding God’s activity in the material world as a whole. In visualising this point, we might imagine two concentric circles, beginning with an inner circle that includes the proclamation of the Word in preaching and the sacraments, which is embraced within the wider circle of the gathered church in a particular place, which listens to and engages with the Word in joyful worship and loving service. These two circles together provide the paradigm through which we interpret God’s presence in the world. The God whom we seek is the one known in the man Jesus,

¹¹ My discussion here is heavily influenced by Ola Tjørhom, *Embodied Faith: Reflections on a Materialist Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).



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who is always encountered by a church community in a specific material context. We might say that the Word is mediated by the material all the way down.

A materialist spirituality, such as that described above, raises some serious questions about church practice. It was Temple who once wrote that:

Christianity [...] is the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions [...] By the [...] nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief in the ultimate significance of the historical process, and in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme.¹²

Yet, in practice, material objects are often treated by church people as being important only in so far as they symbolise or stand in for and allude to truths or realities beyond themselves.¹³ Underlying this tendency is the assumption that the purity of a religion is related to its ability to transcend the merely physical. Such a dualism is odd in an avowedly materialist faith. Might it be, then, that the way in which the Kirk relates to its buildings signals a most profound theological issue with wide doctrinal ramifications. If the Incarnation is taken with absolute seriousness, we are led to believe, not only that God is active and can be encountered through and in the whole created environment, but that, because the Word became flesh, material things have an intrinsic value to God. Since there is no *prima facie* reason for distinguishing between the natural, personal and built environments, for all testify to God's creative presence, it follows that how we treat artefacts, including church buildings, is not a purely pragmatic question, but a matter of Christian discipleship.

Stephen Pattison has developed this line of thinking in fascinating directions. In his Samuel Ferguson Lecture, he argues that 'Humans should enter more fully and consciously into personlike relations of friendship and fellowship with (at least some) artefacts. Indeed, I believe we need to

¹² Quoted by Stephen Pattison in his Samuel Ferguson Lecture, "Paul Tillich, a Virgin with Angels, and the Kitchen Sink: Why We Should Pay More Attention to Everyday Artefacts", University of Manchester, 2008, 12.

¹³ Tillich's encounter with Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels* (1477) is one instance of this pattern. See Pattison, "Paul Tillich", 8.



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learn to love them better'.¹⁴ Interestingly, Pattison maintains that we should relate well to everyday artefacts such as radiators, pens and toasters, as well as the more usual, culturally elevated objects of academic attention, such as beautiful buildings, and that a 'throwaway' attitude to artefacts exhibits a consumerist mentality that is in tension with a Christian spirituality of stewardship.

These are all intriguing suggestions. They offer a theological challenge to the utilitarian stance that can so easily be taken to human artefacts. It may well be that, as Pattison argues, Protestant Christians have been overly prone to see their religion in terms of clear and distinct ideas and vivid experiences, so that artefacts, such as buildings, have been understood as only externally related to faith. If the essence of faith is to do with the apprehension of a transcendent presence or truth, then material things that allude to that which transcends the physical have only an instrumental value. If artefacts are seen as only a means to an end, it is a short step to the full-blown utilitarianism that we see in the contemporary Kirk's approach to its buildings.

In contrast, an emphasis on the created world as the medium through and in which we may encounter God, and the rejection of an overly interiorised understanding of spirituality leads to a renewed appreciation of both the intrinsic and instrumental value of buildings and art to the person of faith.

If the life of faith is nurtured and supported through physical interactions with others and with material things, then it seems reasonable to assume that the buildings in which Christians gather will and should have this function. They should be designed with the intention that they will mediate God's presence and evoke holy desires. This is, of course, exactly what we find in traditional church buildings. The specific design and decoration of such churches have a pedagogic function. This is something our Victorian predecessors understood perhaps better than us, which is why the design of churches was often a matter of theological controversy in the nineteenth century. For many Victorians, architecture 'speaks to the soul' and embodies religious feeling and as such was, as much as worship itself, an 'instrument of the Word'. Its ability to articulate the truths of faith and to create an atmosphere of reverence were seen as

¹⁴ Pattison, 4.



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particularly important.¹⁵

An understanding of the power of a building to embody a message and thus shape our outlook explains the care given in the past to church design. For instance, the prominent place often given to an elevated pulpit indicates the centrality of the preaching of the scriptures in our tradition. Incidentally, the theo-logic of the pulpit poses questions of the modern tendency to discard or underuse the pulpit, for the pulpit is to do with elevating preaching not the preacher. Moreover, the arrangement of the pulpit above the communion table, which is common, is a reminder that the sacrament needs to be interpreted by the scriptures if it is to mediate God's grace. In the older Scottish tradition, the font was attached to the pulpit, a way of making the same point in relation to baptism. And there are many other aspects of church architecture and decoration that play a teaching role, including: the cruciform shape of many churches; the Christian iconography both outside and in; stained glass windows portraying biblical scenes, the lives of saints and local concerns; tablets, such as war memorials, that inscribe the life of the community within the church; and the sense, created by the plainness, spaciousness, or especial beauty of a building that it is a portal to a transcendent sphere. This latter point raises questions about the contemporary trend towards reshaping church buildings as though they were large domestic settings. For all that it is important to make our churches comfortable and welcoming to whoever comes along, the distinctness of churches seems intrinsic to their role. Perhaps, since church buildings aim to provoke feelings of awe and fascination in the presence of the Almighty, they ought not to be places where we ever feel truly comfortable! They ought to be places which both welcome and worry.



The role of a church building in the religious life of a community

The Kirk plays a unique role in the religious life of Scotland, which is analogous to, but different from that of the Church of England. Part of the Kirk's unique role is the provision of 'the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry'.¹⁶ The material instantiation of this commitment are local church buildings,

¹⁵ Whyte, 179.

¹⁶ "The Constitution", 20.



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which are an expression of the church's physical and historical presence in and commitment to every community. This means, that when a church building is closed, there is a sense in which the church is 'abandoning a piece of territory' and undermining its own self-understanding.¹⁷ In other words, the closure of local churches raises the basic ecclesiological issue of whether we will continue to see ourselves as the church that the Articles Declaratory describe. In asking this question, it is surely pertinent to reflect on the fact that some of the ideas driving church policy, such as those of the Fresh Expressions movement, because they arise from a wide range of church traditions, often have little natural affinity to the parochial outlook of the Kirk.¹⁸

I have argued that the mere presence or absence of a functioning church building in a community is significant. There is more to say, however, about the message that a building gives both to congregants and others. Recently at a church meeting, I heard someone compare local churches to branches of Marks & Spencer. This is a false comparison, for a church inhabits the public domain precisely as a place that is not driven by commercial values. A church, whether endowed with a steeple or not, points upwards to a sphere of absolute value that supervenes on the relative, often instrumental values – profit, achievement, competition, status, etc. – that drive everyday life. A church building is a public, material testimony to the need to 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness'.¹⁹ Its presence as an odd, 'impractical' building exposes the tension between the competitive and other values that drive everyday life and those of the kingdom. Like the Jewish Temple of old, a church locates God's presence and challenge in a specific place. It instantiates God's claim to be Lord in this place. It reminds those who see it that the land and community in which they are located is sacred and should not be treated in a purely instrumental way, but with respect.²⁰ Churches are, in Larkin's

¹⁷ Whyte, 177.

¹⁸ A similar point is made by Alison Milbank in her lecture, "Save the Parish", August 3, 2021, St Bartholomew the Great Church, London, https://youtu.be/_ZSmNuVKRXY, where she comments that, what she calls, the 'Holy Trinity Brompton Model' could find a place in any Protestant denomination: it is not intrinsically tied to the parochial outlook of the Church of England (nor, for that matter, the Church of Scotland).

¹⁹ Matthew 6:33.

²⁰ Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2012), Chapter 5.



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words, ‘A serious house’ that stimulate a search for wisdom and hold us accountable to the law and love of God.²¹ Perhaps, this is why they are often vandalised.

In reflecting on the role of national churches like the Kirk, Grace Davie has suggested that they provide ‘vicarious religion’, that is, ‘religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing’.²² Davie provides various examples of how this might occur: performing rituals on behalf of others, such as funerals, believing on behalf of others, acting as moral exemplars, and offering space for debates around contentious, unresolved issues.

With her concept of vicarious religion, Davie is attempting to clarify the relationship between historic churches and the penumbra of people who are not actively involved in congregational life, but who seem to be supportive of what these churches do. These are the large number of mainly older people who will name themselves as Christians when prompted and who feel an investment in historic churches like the Kirk. The nature of their connection to the traditional churches, according to Davie, is that they see them as a kind of public utility, which exist to serve the spiritual needs of a community in a designated place.

As a sociologist, Davie attempts to understand how a large number of ‘nominal’ Christians see historic churches. If we take vicarious religion in this way, it does seem to touch on the experience of clergy in their dealings with many parishioners, particularly in the occasional offices. Moreover, whilst there may be theological ambivalence about Davie’s concept, there is surely no doubt that the national churches do wish parishioners to look to their parish church for spiritual help, perhaps seeing such connections in a missiological vein. However, the efficacy of vicarious religion depends, to a great extent, on the church being materially present in a locality through a building, which can act as a focal point for a community’s spiritual needs and care. Where the Kirk leaves a community without a sanctuary, we might say that it is virtually present, through its commitment in the Declaratory Articles, but actually absent.

²¹ Philip Larkin, “Church Going”, in *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1988), 97–98.

²² Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 6.



Finally, alongside considering the positive role that a church building may play in the religious life of a community, the impact of closure should also be thought about. In this regard, Gill has pointed out that redundant churches continue to communicate a message: that the Christian faith is dying, that it is no longer a live option, because it is so clearly of the past.²³ When church buildings are transformed into homes or shops or left empty, they become visual reminders of the erosion of faith, of a religious past that has gone. In this way, a redundant church undermines mission and inhibits growth.



The lessons of the pandemic

I have argued that there are reasons for thinking that buildings are vitally important to the mission of the Kirk. However, one argument against this position that has bubbled up recently is to do with the experience of lockdowns. Some hold that the resilience of church life during the pandemic, when much worship went online successfully, shows that buildings are overrated resources in a time of financial stringency and numerical decline.

I have, myself, a great deal of sympathy with the view that, where appropriate, the Church needs to make use of digital technology within its worship and administrative life, not least so that it can accommodate those who are unable to make their way to a church building. However, this does not detract from the overall thesis of the present paper. A recent report, based on empirical work throughout Britain, has drawn doubt on the efficacy of online worship during the pandemic, noting that ‘by almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals have been worse than those that came before them’.²⁴ It will be some time yet before an accurate assessment of the impact of the pandemic on the Kirk can be reached. Whilst by necessity online worship has flourished, who can say what the final balance of loss and gain might be. Certainly, in financial and numerical terms, it is likely that the church which emerges from the

²³ Robin Gill, *The ‘Empty’ Church Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2017).

²⁴ Quoted in Madeleine Davies, “Move to online worship a loss, not a gain, say universities’ researchers”, *Church Times*, September 29, 2021,- <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/1-october/news/uk/move-to-online-worship-a-loss-not-a-gain-say-universities-researchers>.



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pandemic will be poorer than before. That is certainly what the Kirk's financial planners are dreading. Moreover, the easily measured cost will likely be outdone by the personal and spiritual pain of many who have been deprived of the physical presence of other worshippers and their usual experience of worship, not least the absence of singing. Then there is the disruptive effect on habitual patterns of church attendance, a practice that sustains the faith of many. We are, as is often said, social and physical creatures and our attitudes and moods are shaped, not only by our conscious experience, but also by our habitual patterns of life, by the presence and example of others and our interactions with our physical, including our built, environment. Whatever the benefits of digital worship, there are also likely to be significant losses as well.



Conclusion

The primary point that this paper has made can be summed up in the words of Whyte:

the church building is thus more than merely a container, a convenient location for gathering people, a worship space. It is also a place: a place freighted with meaning and feeling. It has the capacity to communicate deep spiritual truths and, still more importantly, perhaps, to facilitate the strong emotional experience of religion, which is the seedbed of faith. For the Church itself, then, the church building can be an instrument of mission, a way of attracting, of educating, and of fostering potential disciples. It can surprise, in Larkin's words, a hunger in oneself.²⁵

The Kirk has some important and pressing decisions to make about its buildings that will have long-term consequences. It is vital that this process is informed by serious thinking about the role of buildings in the mission of the church, the impact of closure and the theological priorities that should drive the reordering of sanctuaries and the construction of new builds. The issue of buildings is not simply a question of comfort, flexibility, numbers or money, but raises fundamental questions about what kind of church we wish to be and these need to be addressed before irrevocable decisions are taken.

²⁵ Whyte, 187–88.

