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Consolidation as an energy solution

Is energy conservation on church agendas?

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With all the talk of an energy crisis in America, has there been a serious conversation about conserving energy in our churches?

Even in my retirement days, I get around to various houses of worship, and I am concerned to see how wasteful church buildings are of precious resources. In my hometown of Charleston, W. Va., there are numbers of very large church buildings, which I am positive, eat up a vast store of energy.

With the advent of air conditioning after World War II, the energy needs of congregations have soared. In my own experience, serving a church in the bustling city of Norfolk, Va., I came to believe that cries of delight were heard from the electric company when the church's four massive air conditioning units were fired up early on Sunday morning so that worshippers could be cool and comfortable.

Any reader of the Outlook could bear witness to the same situation.

Churches are often made large so as to offer a sense of grandeur and dignity to divine worship. Even the humblest rural church may offer a view of strong wooden beams beneath a ceiling so high that heat is trapped "up there" while the folks in the pews may feel a chill.

Of course, churches face other energy concerns. Ministers who drive long distances to see parishioners, have to pay elevated prices for gasoline. Those who have "accountable" travel allowances can now charge that account with more than fifty cents a mile for those trips to the hospital, or to the nursing home, or to the parlors of parishioners.

Are there solutions to this situation? Yes, but with the solutions will come pain and grief as congregations are forced to make hard decisions about their use of precious energy resources.

One motivation: Let's consider that Jesus was by necessity a conserver of energy even in his day. The witness of the Bible points to a traveling Jesus who had no permanent dwelling place. He traveled light. He pointed to the natural world as an illustration of the providential care of God. He was, to be sure, never faced with a decision to turn off a cooling system, but the issue of the stewardship of resources was before him. Witness, please, the dialogue between some disciples and Jesus relative to his being anointed by a woman showing her devotion to him. Could not this oil be sold and used to help the poor? The answer of Jesus seems to avoid the question, as he places a theological spin on the anointing. She is seen to have anointed Jesus for his burial.

Well, sure. Our houses of worship are, in a sense, offerings of precious ointment. I must say, that with what we spend on them, we may bury Jesus prematurely.

Suggestions?

Each church should have a small group, perhaps from the property committee, dealing solely with the ecological issues faced by the church. Questions might run this way: How can we enhance our stewardship of this building apart from our personal wants and emotional needs? Churches carry lots of emotional baggage about their beloved structures. There does come a time when we need to decide where and whom to "anoint." The window, dedicated to the memory of Grandma, may have to take second place in difficult days.

Combining and consolidation of congregations is very difficult. Church "A" and Church "B" do not readily join forces. But, they can do just that. In my town, four Episcopal and four United Methodist congregations have joined forces, and not without tears. Now, each communion uses one structure. One redundant building furnishes a home for another, unrelated congregation. The site of one church building, no longer used, will serve as the building site for a new, perhaps more energy-efficient structure for the combined church to meet in. I am sure that some members of St Christopher's Episcopal Church and Canaan United Methodist Church weep when they pass their former homes. They may also rejoice as they see a more crowded sanctuary and a full parking lot.

The Episcopal polity of the aforementioned congregations sped their consolidation. Our beloved Presbyterian polity may make such unions difficult. Church congregations seem to have the power to block united efforts.

Have congregations really looked at working with groups once thought to be "different"? For Presbyterians, Lutherans are good partners, since they are in agreement with one another on many important issues. In Grafton, W. Va., for a number of years, the Church of the Covenant has been a small, but successful joining of Lutherans and Presbyterians long before the Formula of Agreement. Why not look for such confederations in the future?

Why could not two congregations share a building?

I understand that two Mormon congregations share one structure in our area. A former congregation I served now houses a larger African American Pentecostal congregation, while the much smaller founding group continues to use, by courtesy, the structure they have sold to the new congregation. Yet another congregation made the decision to hold all but very special services in their lovely chapel. This was a good step for the present. And, yes, they have air conditioning, and a smaller bill. And, I hope, there is more money for mission.

Another attractive solution is available to many congregations. A community agency may be able to make use of unused space. In one situation with which I am familiar, a community agency has made improvements to an older structure, making it more accessible to all. Is this a very small contribution to ecological concerns? Yes, it is. Still, small efforts can add up.

Yes, those low-flow toilets are great. Stained glass can leak heat and "coolth" like a sieve. Insulation helps. I know, for my very first church, which I served in the early sixties, built an energy-efficient building, insulated with expanded foam and double windows that were state of the art decades ago. I am sure the energy savings have paid off over forty years. Serious attention to building use issues, maximizing the uses of available space for good causes makes sense.

All of this may seem rather trivial. Are not our buildings monuments to our great faith, or the faith of our ancestors? Sure they are. Times, though, are changing. No longer can churches justify occupying so much space so that people looking at them will be awed.

For those of us who live in this economically perilous time, the warning of Jesus should suffice. Remember that when the disciples wondered at the glory of the great stones of the temple, Jesus predicted a gloomy future for such an edifice.

Churches should step up to the pulpit and lead. Now is the time.

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