

by Duke Kwon March 28

I walk by a brown brick church in my neighborhood every day. On Sunday, the aging but still impressive building will be empty on Easter for the first time in a hundred years. And soon, the building will be converted into luxury condos.

While the [impact of gentrification](#) on affordable housing in D.C. and other cities has been a topic of ongoing study and debate, still underappreciated is its impact on a different sort of “housing” — namely, houses of worship. The issue is on my radar because I am the pastor of a church that met in that building until November.

For four years, Grace Meridian Hill was the sole tenant of 3431 13th Street NW, a 100-year-old building formerly owned by Mount Rona Missionary Baptist Church. In 2014, our landlord sold the property to developers. We recently learned the groundbreaking is scheduled for this week.

Although we grieved the loss of our home, our greater concern and lament is for the neighborhood and city. Numerous church properties within a few blocks have been sold to developers in the past few years, including Southern Bethany Baptist Church on Monroe Street NW, Iglesia Ni Cristo on Morton Street NW and Meridian Hill Baptist Church on 16th Street NW.

Church-to-condo conversions are part of a growing trend nationwide. According to [one survey](#), church redevelopment projects nearly tripled across the United States between 2010 and 2015. In 2014 and 2015, the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs [received 31 applications](#) to renovate houses of worship for other uses.

Historic church buildings are becoming an endangered species. Sacred spaces are disappearing from our civic landscape. And I believe our city will be worse off.

A church building exists not simply for its worshipers, but also for the common good. It is a local, identifiable and accessible “sanctuary” for neighbors in need of refuge from the storms of life. It is physical locale in which you can seek God when you feel lost and find a community when you feel lonely. It offers the weak and weary a literal door on which to knock when they need help with their electric bill. It sometimes serves as a polling place and an AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) or ANC (Advisory Neighborhood Commission) meeting place.

In 2009, Ram Cnaan, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, [estimated](#) that urban congregations provide an average of \$476,663 worth of services to their local communities annually. Of course, that’s if the worshiping communities are sacrificially committed to love their neighbors. But the civic value of churches and their buildings extends beyond economic terms. Church buildings are visible emblems of Jesus’ street-level proximity and daily accessibility. He has “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, The Message).

Church buildings are public outposts of the presence of God in the city’s commons.

So when cities like D.C. watch passively as sacred spaces slowly disappear and as “third places” where neighbors can gather and true community can be forged are increasingly privatized, the entire community loses out.

What can be done? First, churches need to be convinced that buildings matter. Followers of Jesus need to recover a theology of place, space and parish that promotes the value of the built environment. This season of remembering Christ’s bodily resurrection is a perfect time to reclaim the historic Christian belief that God cares about physical stuff — bodies and buildings (see 1 Corinthians 15:12-58).

We need a fresh vision of the gospel that compels us to prioritize our neighbor’s well-being. Jesus came not to be served but to serve and give his life for others — and Christians are called to be like him, joyfully and sacrificially devoting our possessions and property toward the benefit of the neighborhood.

Second, the city could create economic incentives for churches to sell their buildings to other churches or community-based nonprofits. Adjustments to zoning regulations could protect historic church buildings (and their wildly attractive footprint) from unfettered redevelopment. Neighbors could advocate for the preservation of houses of worship.

By God's grace, Grace Meridian Hill found a fantastic alternative only several blocks away, and we are flourishing in our new home. The point is that church buildings are slowly disappearing in D.C. And because they have great potential to serve the common good, we should all be concerned.

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 **140 Comments**

