Confessions
Of a Recovering Consumerist

Maribeth Westerfield

In the middle of expressing appreciation to the Philippian church for their financial support of his ministry, Paul writes some strange words for a thank you note. They sound like a bit of an aside: “Not that I am referring to being in need” (Phil 4:11a, NRSV). Reading this note over the shoulders of my Philippian brothers and sisters, I would have had an initial response to stop payment on my check to the great apostle if he did not really need it. But such a knee-jerk reaction would miss the main point of what Paul says next. He continues, “For I have learned to be content with whatever I have” (Phil. 4:11b, NRSV). The apostle accepts the gift of the Philippian congregation (somewhat less than graciously, in my opinion) from an enviable place in life—a place of calm contentment. He has learned one of the most valuable lessons any of us can learn, namely, to get along just fine with what one has.

I am envious of Paul. I am not there yet. I grew up in the baby boomer generation. In our households, more was better. If I take a painfully honest look at myself and my lifestyle, I must admit that I have not yet learned to be content with whatever I have. It is a good and vitally necessary goal. I am still learning to do that which Paul had mastered by the time he penned this letter. Call me a recovering consumerist.

A key step in any recovery is to first recognize that there is a problem. There is a problem. My generation has pushed the boundaries on many things during our lifetimes, not the least of which includes the finite resources of this precious planet we call home. Here is a description of how I am representative of that generation. I live in a four-bedroom house with only one other person. I spend $300 per month to heat and air-condition 2900 square feet of floor space, of which only half gets used. In three of the four bedroom closets, I have clothes hanging so tightly together that I always tangle the hangers when I try to take out a garment to wear for the day. It is time to right-size my lifestyle with the changed circumstances of my life.

Those same words are good advice and counsel to many churches that were built to accommodate my generation and generations before. Buildings constructed in the 1950s and ‘60s were built to house the burgeoning numbers of the boomer generation, most of whom attended church. For many years beyond the ‘50s and ‘60s, capital fund-raising has often continued to be for
new construction of larger buildings, built in the hope that a bigger facility would encourage young families with small children to come. Times have changed, as have church participation patterns, but all too often, buildings have not. Bigger is not always better, and it is time to re-evaluate that philosophy which has driven many a capital campaign.

In his book, *From Our Doorsteps: Developing a Ministry Plan That Makes Sense*, author Rick Morse writes, “A church facility that eats up the congregation’s financial resources while not supporting the ministry of the congregation taxes both the volunteer and financial resources that could be used to sustain ministry.” Using guidelines developed by the ministry I serve (Disciples Church Extension Fund), Morse suggests ways to determine how well a congregation’s space serves, or fails to serve, a congregation’s ministry.

First, with regard to how much space a congregation needs, he says to take the average worship attendance of a congregation, multiply it by eighty, and divide that by the total number of square feet in the building. If the percentage of space used falls below 60 percent, the building is too big for the size of the congregation. Second, regarding how much of the congregation’s budget is used for operating the building, he says that anything over 25 percent of the church budget being used for building-related expenses is too much. How does a congregation make that determination? Take all the operating expenses of the building (and to this I would add any estimated expense for deferred maintenance) and divide that by the total operating expenses.

If the building is too big or too costly per these formulae, it is a stewardship issue. Congregations are called to lead the way in modeling good stewardship of God’s resources for the world. It is hard to do that if a congregation is conspicuously consuming its resources on a building that no longer serves their ministry. It should also be noted here that neither of the previous measurement formulae take into consideration a building’s accessibility or lack thereof. This, too, needs to be part of the stewardship discussion where church buildings are concerned.

So what is a congregation to do when they discover that they are consuming too much of their God-given resources—financial, energy, and time—on a building that is too big, too expensive, too inaccessible, or all of the above? Like with this recovering consumerist, the process of healing begins with recognition that there is a problem. Then, as for me, comes the time for downsizing, redistributing resources, and reevaluating the future. The overarching question for both kinds of recovering consumerist (individuals like me or congregations in ill-fitting buildings) is, how can we be better stewards of all the resources we have been given?

For me, the beginnings of recovery started in Lent 2015, when I read a Facebook post from a pastor-friend. She suggested that instead of giving up food or beverage for Lent, it would be good to clean out closets, garages, drawers, and the like and contribute forty bags of “stuff” to a suitable recipient. While I did not get forty bags of stuff together, I got started on right-sizing—another step in the recovery process. My friend’s church was the recipient of three bags of shoes for their Soles for Souls ministry.

For a congregation, once recognition has led to the conclusion that there is too much space that is too expensive and too inaccessible, the same kind of right sizing begins with letting go of that which no longer serves. Church members can become very attached to their holy places. After all, they have seen loved ones married and memorialized there and children baptized or dedicated there. They can still smell the Easter lilies; or remember the ringing of the church bell. Our buildings have become vessels of our sacred memories.

However, given the new realities of our culture, we no longer need to build cathedrals. The catch words of our ministry these days calls upon us to guide congregations in thinking about holy places that are leaner, greener, and more flexible. Let our capital campaigns (still necessary for those special projects not included in the average church’s operating budget) be for construction of a different type, like smaller, multipurpose buildings constructed close to a public transportation line or for solar panels that may pay for themselves in the future. Maybe it’s time to consider capital fund-raising for portable equipment that a mobile congregation can use in a building they do not even own!

In other words, we need to take a lesson from the apostle Paul and learn to be content with what we have now, not what we had in the ‘50s and ‘60s. There are new realities of church life in the twenty-first century that do not require the big, expensive cathedrals of the past. It is time to get leaner, greener, and more flexible. Faithful stewardship requires it! 😊

---

3. Ibid.