

The Nomadic Church

Bill Easum
and Pete Theodore

A remarkable thing began happening in the final years of the twentieth century. God began directing more and more pastors to bypass the traditional method of planting churches and instead start “Nomadic Churches”—congregations that meet for years in temporary facilities without the cumbersome burden of huge debts incurred from buying land and property at the outset. They focus on building lives and communities instead of building with bricks and mortar. They are shackled to the majestic Builder, not chained to mere buildings.

The Nomadic Church

The Nomadic Church, sometimes called a portable church, is a local church that meets in someone else’s space, which is not a traditional church building, for an extended period of time in order to conduct corporate worship and other ministries.

The Nomadic Church is no longer the face of a few; it’s a growing trend. Thousands of churches are started in the United States each year, and the vast majority of them rent meeting space, many for ten years or longer. That is more than twice as long as a decade ago, and a growing number say they never plan on purchasing property. Consider the comment of Todd Wilson, executive pastor of New Life Christian Church (www.newlife4me.net) in Chantilly, Virginia: “We will consider getting our own property when the costs for renting begin to approach the cost of owning our own property.”

According to a comprehensive 1998 survey, almost 14 percent of all congregations in the United States rent space in a school or other public facility. An even broader study in 2001 found that 10 percent of churches meeting in a church building rent that space from another church. That study also reports that of all faith communities begun since 1945, nearly half of them began in the 1990s. Because of the upsurge in the cost of construction

and because of modifications in ministry philosophy, most of these churches remain without their own campus today. Our observations and networks indicate that this buildingless trend is only increasing since these recent surveys were published.

Two decades ago, some thought that these Nomadic Churches were smaller and catered to the lower half of the income structure. But no more. Today, they come in every size and reach every strata of American culture. In fact, with good reason many former negative perceptions of Nomadic Churches have begun to be shed in recent years.

New Hope Christian Fellowship (www.enehope.org) in Honolulu, Hawaii, is one of the premier examples of a congregation choosing to remain in rented facilities. As of 2003, the average weekend attendance exceeds 1,500 people, including seven satellite sites, and the church still rents worship facilities for all its

locations. They see their group of Levites, the crews who set up and break down each weekend, as one of the basic training grounds for future leaders of the church. Every Sunday morning from 2:00 to 5:30, a team of over a hundred people gather to

set up for services in the rented Farmington High School, which accommodates up to 8,500 people.

In a 1999 interview with their pastor, Wayne Cordeiro, we asked why they were still in rented facilities even though at the time around five thousand people were worshipping with them each weekend. Cordeiro replied, “We did a study of what it would cost to purchase our own worship space. If we did that, we would not be able to spend the amount of money we need to spend on leadership development.” The odds are that New Hope may purchase facilities sometime in the distant future, but they have still set a precedent that is hard to ignore.

And what can we say about influential churches like Bill Hybels’s Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois (www.willowcreek.org)? They spent their foundational

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years in rented movie theaters and are again renting meeting spaces for their expanding campuses. Or what about Saddleback Community Church (www.saddleback.com) in Lake Forest, California? That congregation shuffled between seventy-nine different places and reached more than 10,000 in regular attendance before erecting their first building. Legend is that it got to be a joke: people could attend, if they could find the church!

Because of churches like New Hope, Willow Creek, Saddleback, and many other thriving congregations, the Nomadic Church is no longer viewed as a second-class way to do church. Christian leaders of the emerging world aren't as tied to property and space as are the leaders of earlier generations. Many pastors are eager to take the gospel to the streets and don't have the money or patience for bricks and mortar. They're not willing to wait to tell the story, so the Nomadic Church is a Godsend to them and the countless people they reach.

It's our belief that the percentage of churches renting facilities will continue to grow and that more and more churches will opt to rent nontraditional facilities as long as possible. If that's the case, more research needs to be done to learn how to fortify these mobile congregations.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, \$7.3 billion was spent on religious construction in 2000, up to a hefty 89 percent from 1994. Every year the costs of land and construction increase. To fulfill the Great Commission, the number of new churches that must be planted requires a method that demands less initial capital than in the past. When we ask denominational leaders why they aren't starting new churches, they inevitably mention their lack of money. But money is a major hindrance only if you're eager to buy land and construct a building. In talking with dozens of leaders in charge of church planting for their constituencies, we've learned that it costs between five hundred thousand and a million dollars to plant a church the traditional way!

Disadvantages of a Permanent Building

Many church planters eagerly await the day when they cut the ribbon on a new church facility. That desire is

understandable and there certainly are benefits to a building. We're not trying to suggest otherwise. But it is equally important to consider advantages of the portable paradigm and disadvantages of owning a permanent church facility. Here are a few major drawbacks to owning church property that you need to be aware of.

Cost. The capital needed to acquire land and then design, build, and maintain a permanent facility is astronomical. The closer you are to a population center, the higher the costs. And because land is a limited resource, its expense will only increase. Financial bondage is not uncommon for stationary churches.

Focus. The massive amount of limited resources that must be expended on land and facilities may produce more lasting results—spiritually and eternally—if invested elsewhere. Buildings too easily drive the direct the energies of a church.

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As long as you can meet somewhere, purposefully putting your money into more people, programs, and pastors will out-produce funding a building any day.

Limits. As much as buildings can initially boost a congregation's size, they can just as quickly limit it. Future growth is always limited by the present size of a facility, available parking, and zoning laws. In *When Not to Build*, Ray Bowman explains how church buildings can actually kill church growth.

Definition. Buildings can shape—or misshape—a church by communicating an inadequate image. Even the best designed building today can mis-define the essence or emphases of a church in a relatively short time. Then, you either suffer the consequences or go back to the drawing board and the money pit cycle.

Affections. Church buildings can foster misplaced affections. They can produce unhealthy territorialism, a conviction that certain things ought never to be done in the building and certain others can be done only in the building, and even thinly veiled idolatrous building worship and ego stroking (consider the tower of Babel!). Sacred buildings are virtually universal in human religions, but Christianity does not require or endorse them—maybe for more reasons than meet the eye!

Outreach. Perhaps Stuart Murray (in *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*) expresses this one best: "Having their own building may encourage churches to operate with a centripetal ('come') rather than a centrifugal ('go') mentality in mission, inviting non-members on to church territory at times convenient to church members, rather than going into society to meet people on neutral territory, reversing the apparent thrust of mission in the New Testament."

Multiplication. Churches that have invested enormous amounts of money in buying land and building on it may warily view a proposal to use the building less in order to start a new church elsewhere. After all, redirecting financial assets may mean less ability to upkeep the present building. Mission can be minimized by maintenance.

Effectiveness. A building can't solve nonbuilding problems, and mortar won't accomplish what ministry should accomplish. This is because buildings do not minister; only people do. Leaders too frequently expect a building to do things it never can—and they and their ministry suffer for it.

Churches that have learned to be effective without a permanent home are more likely not to be sucked into these pitfalls if and when they do build. That's why it is so critical to immerse a young congregation in a prudent, biblically balanced perspective on mission, people, buildings, service, and finances. It also helps for Nomadic Churches to know that it's not all rosy on the other side! □

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Bill Easum is a president and senior managing partner in Easum, Bandy and Associates, a church consulting and nurturing firm. He is the author of several books, including *Unfreezing Moves* and *Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First*, both published by Abingdon Press. Pete Theodore is Pastor of Teaching at Rolling Hills Community Church in Tualatin, Oregon.