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TO BUILD OR NOT TO BUILD

I was ordained in the Spring of 1956, fresh out of Seminary, to serve as Assistant Pastor in a vibrant downtown parish in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The congregation had already committed to replace their aging Victorian “Akron-style” church building with a brand new edifice. The congregation’s Building Committee was already at work, as I recall it, and plans were being developed for the new church building even before I arrived on the scene. Be sure to reference [Essay 80](#), above, “Revisiting the Akron Plan”, if you’re interested in probing my “back-story”.

Noting my interest in architecture, the local Conference of Lutheran Churches, as I remember it, within a year or so of my arrival, asked me — the new boy in town — to speak to pastors and interested laypeople on the subject of Church Architecture.

Now, these were the mid ‘Fifties, remember, the days of the North American Church’s vital Springtime, its “Palm Sunday”, when new church buildings were springing up like weeds in every suburban subdivision.

The audience for my remarks, that day now fifty years ago, included several architects, as I recall it — including some from the team that was charged with designing the new church where I was serving. And what I said was met with stony silence by many of those present, the architects most especially.

So I want to re-visit that moment in these paragraphs. Of course, as I write these words, the world-wide Christian Church is no longer experiencing its “Palm Sunday”, but rather its “Good Friday”. In Church life these days, it’s no longer glorious “Springtime” but rather chilly “Winter”.

But I’ll repeat here my remarks, somewhat amplified. It was a prescient presentation fifty years ago — if you will allow me to say it. And it bears reflection especially today.

Thinking of building a new “House for the Church”? Here’s advice from an old-timer. Four things to consider *before you build*.

1) Don't build at all. That's the first consideration. I'd call it Ethical Consideration Number One. The building of any new church today must be able to justify itself, its own expenditures. The question is this: Does the Western world need another Christian church building?

Aren't there better ways to spend your money? Aren't there other needs more pressing for a Christian congregation? I'm thinking of justice issues un-addressed, locally as well as internationally.

Couldn't your parish investigate *sharing* space with another parish? Couldn't you *scrounge* space elsewhere, rather than build? Constructing yet another Christian church building, in Western societies, ought to be approached like waging war: It ought to be a last resort.

2) Build only with the advice and consent of other local congregations and Church judicatories. I'm thinking of local Lutheran congregations and Synods, but I'm also thinking ecumenically. I'll call this Ecclesial Consideration Number One: Who has a stake in what you'd be doing, besides your own people? Would other Lutheran parishes welcome your new venture? Other *Christian* churches and judicatories? Whose territory would your building be invading?

I'm arguing here out of one of my favourite Lost Causes, that of a recovery among us of some sense of a geographical parish. See [Essay 59](#) above. Are the Lutheran church buildings in your town — are the other *Christian* church buildings! — sensibly located?

I write these words out of sad experience, experience not available to me when I first addressed those pastors and architects in Pennsylvania. After four happy years in Williamsport, I moved to Lutheran Campus Ministry at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, where one of our sponsoring parishes shared a downtown four-corner intersection — with two other Lutheran churches! Of the same Synod! Three Lutheran congregations competing with each other on the same four-corner intersection! Scandalous!

3) Don't build big. In the words of a Jesuit friend: "If it needs a Public Address system, it's too big." I'll call this Ethical Consideration Number Two.

Even in 1950, church planners and architects were arguing *against* "building for Easter". It's simply imprudent to assume you'll need every Sunday a building large enough to accommodate those holiday crowds that only come at Easter or Christmas. Better to build more modestly, and have to put up chairs for the overflow on festivals.

It's not simply a matter of finances. It's also a matter of human psychology. Nothing is more dis-spiriting than to worship every week in a half-filled building. Conversely, nothing is more exhilarating than to have to put up chairs to accommodate an unexpected crowd!

I've argued before that there's an optimum size for a Christian Church — mega-church protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. And I mean optimum in both masonry and membership.

As to masonry — the church building itself — see the Rule above about PA systems.

As to membership, I'm not clear, yet, as to optimums. But when your parish begins to show signs of outgrowing your without-a-PA-system building, then my best advice is simply to split in two. Form a second congregation — a “daughter” congregation, so to speak. And why not gather “daughter” for worship in the same space where “mother” worships, but at a different hour?

Of course this is already the experience of many parishes that schedule multiple services every weekend. In such a situation you have — *de facto* — two separate congregations, two separate sociological groupings — pastoral protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

Admit it, I say, and make creative use of what you have. Two distinct and separate congregations, each with its own pastor, each with its own membership, each with its own worship style, perhaps each with its own programs and priorities — but both actually sharing the same space! Perhaps actually sharing a similar mission in their community! Actually cooperating and not competing! Surely a foretaste of the Kingdom of God! See [Essay 20](#) above.

But I digress. My single point here is building size. A parish church should not look like a cathedral, in size or scale. In the words of still another cynical friend: “You show me a North American parish church building the size and scale of a European cathedral and I'll show you a) a *monument to the ego* of the pastor or bishop who built it, and b) a *white elephant* to succeeding generations of worshippers.”

4) Don't build “two-room” axial worship spaces, with chancel up there and nave down here. Don't fasten east-facing pews to the floor. Don't have pews at all: Chairs, please. Succeeding generations will thank you. These arguments belong to Ecclesial Consideration Number Two.

Two-room, axial, east-facing buildings pose three all-but-insurmountable problems for modern worshippers. They're *hierarchical*: They're a contradiction to our theology of the priesthood of all believers. They're *presentational*: They encourage an audience-performer understanding of worship. And they're *anti-communal*: They reinforce a sense of private devotion at the expense of the corporate.

In the words of yet another mentor: “When your architecture and your theology are in conflict, architecture always wins.” For more on these issues see previous See [Essay 76](#).

We're living today in an age more like the first four centuries of Christian history than any time since then. Christendom is over. And I say Good riddance. Like the ancient Israelites, we're living today in a time when the Tent, not the Temple, is the more appropriate architectural metaphor for Christian church buildings.

I argued this fifty years ago in Pennsylvania. I'll argue it today.

