

**Purpose:** To connect with those who have an active relationship with Church Doctor Ministries as peers in ministry, clients, and partners in prayer and support.

**The Church Doctor® Report provides a quick read of strategic and influential information.**

(To sign up: email [johnwargowsky@churchdoctor.org](mailto:johnwargowsky@churchdoctor.org))

## **Your Church Building: Mission Benefit or Roadblock?**

Winston Churchill made this interesting observation: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” I’m not sure he was focused on church facilities, but it is worth serious consideration for the leaders of every ministry.

Over the last 40 years, our Church Doctors have consulted well over 500 US congregations from 78 denominations as well as nondenominational and independent churches. As part of the onsite visit, we interview a cross-section of the congregation. Church members are often vocal about church staff, programs, and challenges and frequently share opinions about the pastor’s sermons, personality, and leadership. Further, they often share thoughts about ministries or programs. However, they rarely bring up issues about their facilities. The exception? Relatively new members often notice both excellent and not-so-beneficial issues about the building(s). For long-term members, the facility is like a well-worn shoe. And that “shoe” could be centuries old and somewhat obsolete.

Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries, now led by Tracee J. Swank. Our team



helps churches to effectively reach unchurched people: training Christians in mission principles that work. God wants lost people to be found and brought into your church. Kent and Tracee are authors of the new devotional book *An Apple a Day: A Daily Dose for Everyday Faith*. It contains 365 short entries that take three to five minutes each to read.

[www.churchdoctor.org](http://www.churchdoctor.org)

Email Kent: [kenthunter@churchdoctor.org](mailto:kenthunter@churchdoctor.org)

Have you ever been to a church that has a bell tower? What's up with that? The story is a great example of how Christianity can get "rusty" in old—very old—denominations. The Protestant and Catholic traditions of many of the early churches built in the United States were developed by Christians with generational influence from Europe.

Long before radio, television, and the Internet, news traveled from town to town, city to city, through people. There were couriers who traveled on horseback—or by other means—from village to village or city to city to share the news. Most often, they would use the local church, which usually had the greatest capacity for a crowd. When the courier arrived, someone would ring the bell in the steeple. That was the signal to the townspeople to drop whatever they were doing and gather at the church. The courier would use the pulpit to share everything from regional weather events to reports about the progress of a war, updates on the nation's leadership, and who won the national election.

This begs the question: Why do some churches have bell towers today? The most common answer given: "We've always done it that way." While this is not an "oddity" to the members, it raises a strange—often subconscious—reaction among newcomers to the faith. There is a subtle message: "Christian religion? Old, out-of-date, and irrelevant to my life."

## **Interesting Church Building Experiences**

It is quite likely that I've visited well over 1,000 church buildings in various places around the world. I was with our Church Doctor Ministries leader, Tracee, when we had the opportunity to worship during a vesper service at Westminster Abbey in central London, England. It was liturgical in a very old building—with numerous, well-known, world-class leaders buried under the floor. Their names are engraved in the cement. Honestly? It was an awesome experience! Would it make an impact on tourists who are Christ-followers? Absolutely! Would it reach the majority of London, who are not practicing Christians? Not likely!

One of my favorite visits was in Paris when we took our children to the Notre Dame Cathedral—long before the fire. It was actually my fourth or fifth visit to this magnificent facility. When we were there with our children, it happened to be Sunday morning. There were over 100 tourists taking in the majestic facility—and about 15 older people participating in worship in the massive sanctuary. Both extreme impressions were unforgettable.

At one point in my work as a Church Doctor, I was asked to speak at the annual conference led by Robert Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral. My teaching segment followed Bill Hybels, and I was followed by John Maxwell. Standing in the pulpit, which was familiar to millions of television viewers who watched each Sunday, was a little overwhelming. Yet, without question, the view over the crowd was significant. The cathedral was packed with church leaders who came to the conference from around the world. Yet, today it is owned by the Catholics, and the outreach vision of Schuller is no longer the mission.

When we lived in Australia, my wife, Janet, and I traveled to the Outback and visited the Aboriginal mission in Hermannsburg. As we attended worship, it was clear that to reach a people group that is culturally nomadic is a real challenge. Their "walkabout" culture results in constant turnover. So, what kind of church building works for that?

In South Africa, I was asked to preach on a Sunday before our conference began on Monday morning. One of the leaders suggested that at the end of the service, I invite the rest of our American team to come forward and offer prayer for anyone who wanted it. We did, and an hour later we were still praying for people who were in lines across the front of the church. The building? It was plain, somewhat dirty, with uncomfortable chairs, and very hot. Yet, the

people didn't care.

In Nigeria, I was invited to preach at a “new” church that had recently been started. One of the elders picked up my wife and me at the hotel. When we arrived at the church, we had to cross a little bridge over a ditch filled with raw sewage. Just on the other side, there were several small circles of children sitting in the red African dirt. Women from the church were teaching each little group. The elder told us it was their Sunday school. When we entered this “young” (new) church, I was shocked to see over 800 people. It was a former warehouse with no windows. It had to be 110 degrees in there. People were sitting on benches, about six inches wide with no backs. They already had been worshipping for an hour. When we were led to our seats at the front, we met the pastor. I asked him, “When do I preach?” He said, “It will be a while yet.” An hour later, I asked him, “How long should I preach?” (I figured these people had been there for two hours. I thought to myself, “I could cut my sermon to twenty minutes.”) The pastor replied, “You must preach for an hour—or they will be disappointed.” There was no pulpit. I just stood at the front. When I had finished, there was literally a 6-foot puddle on the floor around me from my sweat in the heat. My clothes were soaked!

## **My Favorite Church Building**

I could continue with stories about church buildings from all over the world. Yet, my all-time favorite worship service was in the Amazon jungle in Brazil. We flew to Manaus, a large city with tall buildings and busy roads—packed with cars and trucks. However, when we were there, it was difficult to drive there! There are few roads through the jungle, and the roads that existed were considered dangerous. Historically, most of the vehicles in this busy city were brought by boats up the Amazon River: cars, trucks—everything.

After our conference with a few hundred pastors—who came from throughout the region—we boarded a ship to travel up the Amazon River to some remote villages. On the third or fourth day of our voyage, we reached a little village on the banks of the Amazon. It was a Sunday morning. My daughter, Laura—who was in high school at the time—was with me, as well as several other church leaders from the US.

Our local leader was a Presbyterian pastor and native of Brazil. He served a large church in Manaus, but also had cultivated a ministry in small villages up and down the Amazon River. He grabbed my arm and said, “We are going to worship at the village church, and you will preach. Your interpreter, Everaldo, will interpret all that you say.” The pastor led us down a jungle path until we reached a gate that was part of a fairly significant fence. I asked, “Why is this area fenced in?” He replied, “So the cows don't get out.” I responded, “Why are there cows grazing around the church?” He said, “Because if they didn't eat the vegetation in the jungle, you couldn't find the church.”

This little church was built about 3 or 4 feet off the ground—probably to discourage snakes. There were three wooden steps to get up to the church. The floor was rough-hewn timber. There were benches without backs. The “walls” were just studs to hold up the roof—and let the muggy air into the worship space. As this little church filled with people from the village, a lady entered with two small children and sat in the first row, about 2 feet from me when I preached. During my sermon, she nursed the smaller child. The other one, slightly older, fell asleep on the floorboards, then wet his pants, and a small, yellow stream was moving toward my feet. Halfway through my sermon, a cow strolled by the open wall to my right and gave out a loud “moooooo.” My worldview about church buildings would never be the same. I hope the same goes for you!

## **What About the Building Where You Worship?**

What are the “takeaways” from visiting hundreds of church facilities?

1. Before you build a huge facility or add on more square feet of space, consider starting an outpost “branch” of your church. It can be in a different area or in the same community, yet have a unique setting, with a different style of worship. You know, the concept “different strokes for different folks”—but the same message from Scripture. You see, you can remain faithful to the same biblical commitment, the same preaching message. This is what we consultants call the same “philosophy of ministry.” You *can* take God at His Word: “Be fruitful and multiply” venues. Jesus said basically the same words as His Father, adding spiritual multiplication: “Make disciples.” According to the New Testament, this is implied: “Make disciples, who make disciples, who make disciples.” You could multiply by providing different “outposts” from the same church.
2. Sometimes multiplying church facilities provides the potential to reach new people by using a different, more contemporary style of music or a different language—to reach those who are culturally different. While 1 Peter 2:9 says, “You are a chosen race,” when Jesus said, “Go, therefore and make disciples of all *nations*” (Matthew 28:19), the word there is actually *peoples*. In mission school, I learned this principle: It is called the “people group approach to world evangelization.” The Bible says that even though Jesus is the “Son of God,” He became like us in order to reach us for eternity. When we are like *Him*, we will reach *them*.

In Matthew 24, the disciples wanted to know when the end of the world would occur. They wanted a sign. Jesus gave them the “historical marker” of His return: “...this Gospel will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations [*peoples* or *people groups*]: and *then* the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). It is an issue of self-centered arrogance to require unbelievers to learn your language, love your style of worship music, or follow your rituals as a prerequisite to meet Jesus and learn about salvation.

The Pharisees had a “one-size-fits-all” approach. But not Jesus. Not Paul, who said, “I become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

3. What are the “barriers” that keep some people from attending your church building? They include: (1) an inadequate parking lot that fills up and (unintentionally) says to newcomers, “You are not welcome”; (2) facilities that have no *obvious* front door; (3) steps that signal “climbing is a prerequisite to meet Jesus here”; (4) restrooms that are hard to find without a guide or are inadequate in size to accommodate the crowd; (5) a form of seating, like pews, that became obsolete about 100 to 200 years ago; (6) an approach to worship that uses archaic language forms that subconsciously signal to the 60-year-old person who is a *baby Christian*: “If you don’t get it, you’re not welcome”; and (7) inadequate fellowship space that signals, “We don’t have room for you.”
4. Another issue is the size of the parcel of land available to your church. Is there room to expand without decreasing the parking? Would a facility addition confuse the “people flow” for newcomers who look for the nursery, Sunday school, church office, sanctuary, and/or restrooms? Can you expand without adding steps?
5. Is your church building visible to your whole community? Is it on a main road? Would every resident within 5 to 10 miles drive or walk by your facility sooner or later? Can your members tell their unchurched neighbors how to find your church using three turns or less?
6. Is your facility in good condition? Is it financially reasonable to maintain? For how many

years? Is it a good Kingdom investment at its present age? Are you being good financial managers of the asset you call “God’s church”? Does it signal—to those who have never been inside—that “God is relevant to my life” and “These people are serious about impacting our community”?

These are very hard questions. They are not meant to offend anyone. Most Christians want to reach people for Jesus. Most parents desperately want their children to be active believers. Jesus asked some hard questions of the disciples. Some of them were much more challenging than bricks and mortar. Jesus asked, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And then He got to the real question: “Who do **you** say I am?” (Matthew 16:13-15 NIV).

## **Learn From History**

My wife and I were in Riga, the capital city of Latvia. We saw a huge Lutheran church building near the square in the middle of the city. Our guide said, “This church has the largest pipe organ in this whole area of Europe. They even provide concerts, and many people come from all over.”

When I asked how many people attended the church for worship, our guide responded, “Only a few—mostly older people.” We can learn from this! Take care in what your church invests. To be clear, Jesus had no buildings, no instruments. There’s nothing wrong with having a facility where people can worship Jesus and learn about salvation and not get rained on. But, at the end of the day, Jesus focused on people. The whole point of the Christian movement is to reach people for Jesus—no matter what it takes. We Christians should have whatever is necessary, whatever it takes, to get Christ to people—and no more!