



# Rebuilding for the Future

One of my favourite TV programmes is *Grand Designs*, hosted by Kevin McCloud. The programme follows the trials and tribulations of couples as they attempt to transform their dream home into reality. I especially like the episodes where the dream is to turn a dilapidated ruin of a castle (or some other heritage building), into a functioning modern home. How much should be preserved? How much restored? How much must be replaced? Will it rain? It is balancing these considerations that is vital in completing a building that is sympathetic to its past without becoming a theme-park replica, and functional and modern without becoming completely soulless.

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For Kevin McCloud, the key design principle seems to be preserving the “narrative” of the building, so that future generations can “read” its history. By this I take him to mean, preserving enough elements of the buildings past history so that they remain an integral part of the buildings character and identity.

Perhaps it’s because I live in Christchurch, but I can see many parallels between *Grand Designs* and the task of rebuilding the churches of our city. I am also sure that the same is true for other parts of the country, for in many places church congregations have inherited buildings that have become inadequate for the on-going life of God’s people in that place. How then should we proceed, especially given the enormous cost of renovating and extending a building?

One school of thought would tell us that spending large amounts of money on buildings is obscene — after all, the church is the people not the bricks and mortar! That is true to a point, but God’s people still need a place to meet. Their answer is to rent the local school hall or community centre. The reality in Christchurch is that churches are having to do just that, at least for the short term. And I’m sure that the old-school secularist would just love to rid our city landscape of its churches once and for all.

For this reason I was interested to read the July/August edition of *Barnabas Aid*, the magazine of the Barnabas Fund which supports persecuted Christian minorities around the world. One of the articles stressed the importance of church buildings for Christian minorities: “For impoverished Christian populations, church buildings are often the centre of all the Christian community’s activities, since no other facilities are available to them.” But a church building offers so much more: “A building can help bring self-respect and dignity to a despised minority. A

church building is a visible symbol of a Christian presence and of hope for the future, bringing encouragement to Christians who are viewed with contempt by the majority community.” In the light of the value of Church buildings to minority Christians, we need to consider whether it is perhaps our western tendency to internalise and spiritualise our faith that has led us to undervalue buildings and to fall in step with a culture that wishes to banish religion from the public square.

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Another school of thought tells us that if we must own buildings, then let them be multi-purpose community spaces which the congregation shares with other community groups. So a number of congregations have built gymnasiums, community centres or auditoriums for this purpose. The result is that the buildings do not look anything like a regular church building. And while the congregation may have exclusive rights to Sunday bookings, they must compete with other users for available time slots, effectively become tenants in their own building. It seems to me that this is really only another form of church camouflage, only this time with the church as landlord.

The lesson I take from watching *Grand Designs* is the need to preserve as much of the narratives of our church buildings, whether we are repairing, rebuilding or planning extensions. Following Kevin McCloud’s principles, we need

to consider at least three narratives. First, there is the historical narrative: rather than completely sweeping away the past and starting again, we should consider how the remnant can form part of the new construction. Second, there is the congregational narrative: can the shape and structure of the building reflect something of the congregational life. And third, there is the mission narrative: what will the building itself communicate to passersby concerning the purpose of the church and the gospel?

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I apologise if these seem rather vague and abstract, but consider two examples. The

Christchurch Cathedral was built in a neo-gothic style by Victorian Anglicans. They had a very clear view of what a cathedral should look like and how it should function as a place of worship. Although we are increasingly conscious that that style of Church life is now outmoded, one has to give the Victorians credit for clearly communicating their ideals through the architecture of the buildings they constructed.

The Closed Brethren afford us another example. From the outside you would not know that their buildings were churches at all. They are of concrete block construction with no external windows, surrounded by a large car park, and enclosed behind sturdy metal gates. Even the entrance is not usually visible from the street. The message is clear: the Christian is to withdraw from the world into the ark of Christian truth (as they see it).

Ask yourself the next time you enter your local church: what are the narratives that this church building communicates to the Christian worshipper or the wider community?

**The Revd Malcolm Falloon**