The Importance of Place:
What Should we do with Old Church Buildings?

Revd Katharine Green,
Research Assistant, CODEC
St John's College, Durham

Abstract

The question of what we should do with church buildings is an issue of vital concern for the Church in Britain in the twenty-first century as it seeks new ways to revitalise its life and mission. This paper explores a theology of place in relation to church buildings and seeks to develop possible ways forward for those confronted with the problems of old, redundant or problematic churches. The paper has a strong practical theology focus and emerges from a consideration of methodology in relation to the Pastoral Cycle, which informs its structure. It begins with 'experience', which remains central throughout, drawing on two case studies from the North East of England. It then looks at sociological and psychological studies to consider the importance of place, before considering what makes certain places sacred, and theologically reflecting on place in relation to Scripture, tradition and ecclesiology. It concludes with some practical ministerial outcomes, which could be implemented within a concrete church setting.

Key Words: Place; Space; Church buildings; Ecclesiology; Mission.

Introduction

The question of what we should do with church buildings is an issue of vital concern for the Church in Britain in the twenty-first century as it seeks new ways to revitalise its life and mission. This essay explores a theology of place in relation to church buildings and seeks to develop possible ways forward for those confronted with the problems of old, redundant or problematic churches. My interest in this topic stemmed in part from the time I spent working as a Pastoral Assistant in the Old St Pancras Team in Camden Town, London. During this time (2004–2005), I helped to run a winter night shelter which took place in a large Victorian Gothic church building. The homeless slept on the floor of the church building and food was provided in the adjacent church kitchen. The alternative use of this space led me to reflect on the significance of place as well as the restrictions of many old church buildings.

Methodology and Outline

A good model of theological and practical reflection for this topic would be that of a plait, with experience running through the centre, woven around by analysis and theological reflection, flowing out into ministerial outcomes.
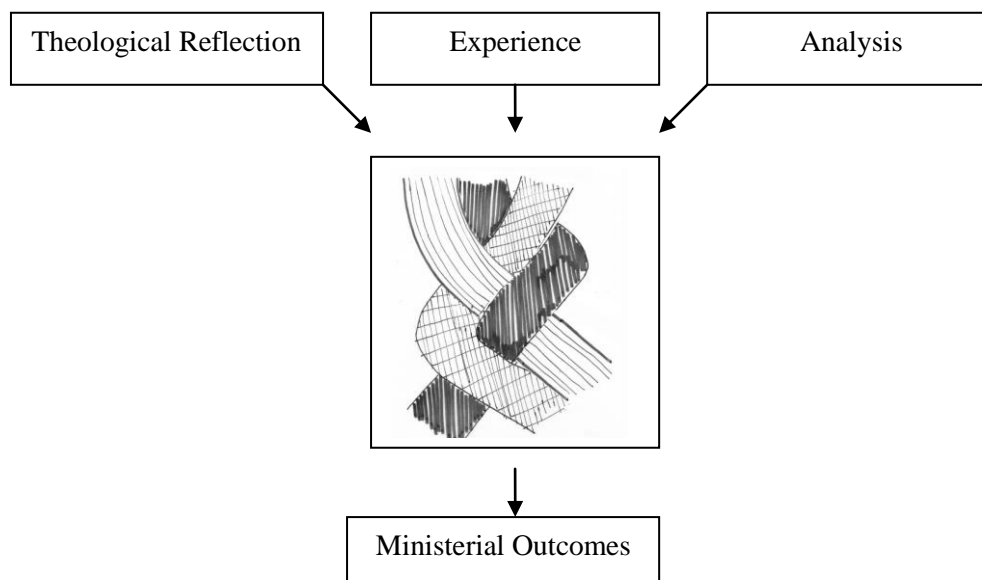
This would ensure that experience remained central throughout and would account for overlap between the disciplines. I have chosen, however, to use an adapted form of the pastoral cycle, since this provides a clearer structure and development of understanding:[1]
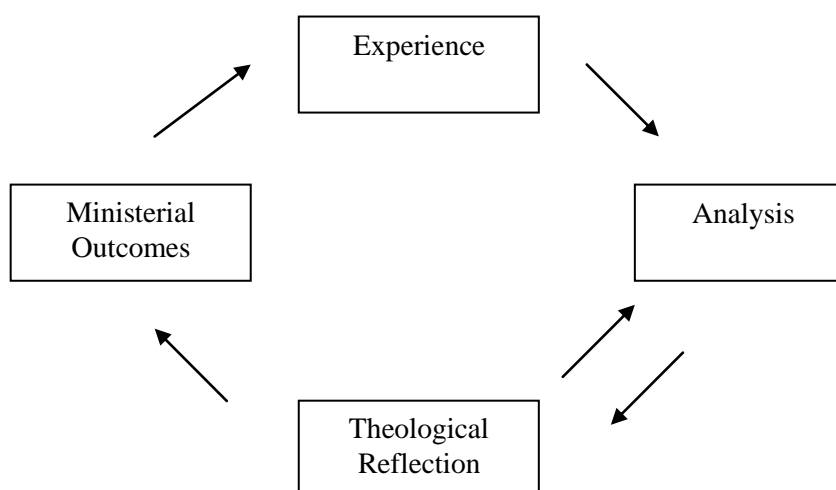
The particular experience is drawn from case studies of two situations within the North East of England, namely the churches of Holy Cross, Ryton with St Hilda's, Hedgefield, in the Tyne Valley to the West of Newcastle upon Tyne, and the Urban Ministry and Theology Project (now 'Mission Initiative Newcastle East' [MINE]) in

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[1] Based on the model provided by Emmanuel Lartey, 'Practical Theology as a Theological Form', in David Willows and John Swinton (eds.), *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000), 73.

Byker, Newcastle.[2] It reflects on the problems posed by these old church buildings and the way they are viewed by the church congregations and the wider community. The analysis involves reflection on the importance of place, drawing on sociology and psychology. The theological reflection looks briefly at several theological sources in order to highlight the dialectic regarding place. Ministerial outcomes are then drawn from a critical correlation of the above. An additional arrow is inserted within the cycle, which runs back between theological reflection and analysis. This is because there are points at which the theological reflection is related to and critiqued by the analysis and vice versa.

Experience

The Church of England has approximately 16,000 church buildings, over 12,000 of which are listed. A church is often the oldest building still in use within a town, village or city.[3] Old buildings, however, can bring with them many problems and can end up acting as 'bad masters' rather than 'good servants' to the life of the church community and the spreading of the Gospel.[4] They can require constant maintenance and become a financial drain; they are often lofty and draughty, requiring huge expenditure on heating. The layout often appears highly impractical for modern mission with features, including rigid pews and elevated clergy and choir stalls, that may communicate an image of the Church as 'irrelevant' or 'outmoded'.[5] In addition, English Heritage is concerned to safeguard 'features of special historic, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest' in listed places of worship; thus, even if finances are available, a Grade 1 listed building may be faced with other restrictions.[6]

The two case studies illustrate some of these problems.

1. Holy Cross, Ryton and St Hilda's, Hedgefield

Holy Cross is a Grade 1 building dating from 1220, with many features of unique beauty. St Hilda's is a Grade 2 listed building that dates from 1890 and was built originally for the pit village of Addeson (part of Ryton). A Quinquennial Inspection of St Hilda's in 2002 pointed out several areas of maintenance that needed attention, including the risk of plaster falling from the ceiling and repairs to the roof and gutters. Long term problems with structural crackings and erosion of masonry were also foreseen. In particular, the church needed a lot of work in order to comply with

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[2] The case studies were undertaken in 2005–2006.

[3] Church of England, 'Visit Our buildings' (2012), http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/our-buildings/visit-our-buildings.aspx (5 January 2012). Church of England, 'Our Buildings' (2012), http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/our-buildings.aspx (5 January 2012).

[4] Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Church Building: A Pearl of Great Price', *Epworth Review* 11, no. 2 (1984), 57.

[5] Kenneth White, *Centres for the Servants: Parish Plant Updated,* Grove Liturgical Study 4 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1975), 6–7.

[6] English Heritage, 'Authorisation of Works to Places of Worship', http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/advice/advice-by-topic/places-of-worship/ecclesiastical-exemption/ (5 January 2012), Section 2 (Code of Practice).

the requirements of disability access. Finances were tight and concern was raised regarding the payment of the parish share. Several options were available: they could make minor short term alterations; begin a large scale project to make the church into a multi-functional space; or close the building and merge the congregation with that of Holy Cross, thus maintaining only one church building. After two years of deliberation and hard work from the PCC they decided on the latter and the church was closed in 2005.

2. St Michael's Church (Part of the Urban Ministry and Theology Project)

St Michael's Church is a large Grade 2 listed building that was built in 1862. By 2001 the building had declined a great deal and congregation numbers had become very low. The roof was leaking, the church was damp and without sufficient heating: mould was growing on the walls. Some members of the congregation wanted to begin minor repairs to the building but it was realised that more needed to be done than simply solving the problem of the building if the congregation was to survive. A decision was made in 2002 that the congregation would temporarily relocate to a shop on the high street in Byker and that extensive maintenance work would be done on the building. It was hoped that the building would then be used as a multi-purpose centre within the community.

This draws attention to the problem of small, often elderly, congregations trying to maintain large decaying buildings and the need for radical action if these Christian communities are to stay alive.

Church buildings, however, are often highly valued by church congregations, the local community and within national life. This is something for which there is increasing evidence: national opinion polls from 2000–2009 show that 85 per cent of adults visit a church or place of worship each year.[7] In both the above case studies, several regular church members and many local community members expressed attachment to 'their' church building and experienced a sense of grief as a result of its closure or relocation. Indeed, a church building is often significant to 'associated members', people who come inside the building infrequently, to mark rites of passage or Christian festivals, but who still feel a 'link' with the church itself.[8] When it was announced that St Hilda's was going to close, the Christmas Eve service was the best attended for years: 298 attended, in contrast to the average of 22 communicants on a Sunday. A survey of the local community regarding the

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[7] Church of England, 'Facts and Stats'(2012), http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats.aspx (5 January 2012), Section 2a (Church Attendance and Visits). Church of England, 'Church Statistics 2009/10: Parochial Attendance, Membership and Finance Statistics Together with Statistics of Licensed Ministers for the Church of England, January to December' (London: Archbishops' Council, Research and Statistics, Central Secretariat, 2011), http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1333106/2009churchstatistics.pdf (5 January 2012), 9.
[8] Richard Thomas, *Counting People In: Changing the Way we Think About Membership and the Church* (London: SPCK, 2003), 18. The Church Heritage Forum, 'A Future for Church Buildings, Report by the Church Heritage Forum' (2003), http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1262648/gs1514.pdf (5 January 2012), 3.

potential closure of St Michael's showed that they did not want the building to be sold: the building was part of Byker, it held memories and associations and was important to them even if they did not attend worship. Indeed, a church building may also 'embody the nation's history and collective memory', through memorials or graveyards, and have particular architectural or historic significance, acting as 'a treasury of our national and cultural inheritance'.[9]

Analysis

The question arises as to why church buildings hold such significance for people. According to Thomas Gieryn, 'place' can be defined as a particular 'spot in the universe', the 'distinction between here and there'. It is invested with 'meaning and value' and only becomes a 'place' when it is named, identified, felt or imagined.[10] It could be argued that there is a severe lack of place in postmodernity. Possible contributors to this include: an increase in travel and mobility and the consequent division of towns and cities into 'segregated niches of homogeneous activities'; developments in technology and communication, which enable once localised activities to take place at a distance; and the 'cloning' of places, evidenced by 'the invasion of Macdonald's and other familiar icons'.[11]

Alongside this, however, are trends in contemporary society that suggest that place is still important to many, such as the recent increase in pilgrimage, visits to the shrines of national figures such as Lady Diana, and the surge in home improvements.[12] Indeed, it could be said that 'In spite of (and perhaps because of) the jet, the 'net and the fast-food outlet, place persists as a constituent element of social life and historical change.'[13] The sense of the continued importance of church buildings is perhaps one example of this persistence of place and raises the question as to whether there is a fundamental human need for place that remains unmet in contemporary society.

There have been various studies on psychology and place that suggest place is important in relation to identity, memory, belonging and wellbeing. A study by Clare Twigger-Ross and David Uzzell, for example, argues that place is 'inextricably linked with the development and maintenance of continuity of self'; certain places may act for some as a reminder of a past self or event which gives continuity to their identity.[14] Memories of events that occurred in a specific place may lead one to attach personal 'emotional meaning' to that place; Gieryn uses the example of a

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[9] Heritage Forum, 'A Future for Church Buildings', 3.

[10] Thomas F. Gieryn, 'A Space for Place in Sociology', *Annual Reviews Sociology 26* (2000), 464–5.

[11] Gieryn, 'A Space for Place', 469; Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 148; John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 11–12; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 3–4.

[12] Thomas, *Counting People In*, 3, 9; Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 302.

[13] Quoted by Gieryn, 'A Space for Place', 463.

[14] Claire L. Twigger-Ross, and David L. Uzzell, 'Place and Identity Processes', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 16 (1996), 208.

group of friends for whom memories of the 'good times' they shared in a particular coffee shop were the basis of their close relationship, which was then disturbed when the café was shut down.[15] Indeed, in the case of St Hilda's, many who expressed grief at the church closure were those for whom the building had been the location of significant events in their lives and held precious memories. Place is often linked to a sense of belonging; Richard Thomas refers to 'our often unconscious longing for a physical location that we know and where we are known'.[16] It can also be said to foster a sense of well being and security; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell suggest that people who are 'attached' to a particular area will express 'positive self-esteem from that attachment'.[17]

The importance of place, however, will inevitably vary according to the individual; whilst change in place for some results in 'grief or loss', others feel no 'particular need to be rooted to a place'.[18] Indeed, whilst highlighting the human need for place, there are also those who affirm the need for change and the expanding of 'horizons'. It could be argued that there needs to be 'a balance between attachment to place and the realization that it is but a "temporary abode"'.[19]

Returning to a more comprehensive definition of place, it could be said that an investment of value and meaning is what defines 'place' as different to 'space'; 'Space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings and values are sucked out.'[20] This is the root of what John Inge and Philip Sheldrake see as the 'loss of place' in postmodernity. What were once 'places' have become 'spaces' because they no longer 'enrich people's humanity' or build up relationships.[21] This suggests that place requires 'human encounter' or interaction; the physical cannot be detached from the human geography of a place, our 'view of place' must necessarily be 'relational'.[22]

Moving Towards Theological Reflection

Reflecting more specifically on sacred place, it is often said that there are certain places that are especially set apart or holy. The Scottish Isle of Iona, for example, has been referred to as a 'thin place', where the spiritual seems closer to earth.[23] One reason for the sacredness of certain places could be due to their use as places of prayer and worship over centuries.[24] Tom Wright suggests that 'when God is

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[15] Gieryn, 'A Space for Place', 481.
[16] Thomas, *Counting People In*, 29.
[17] Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 'Place and Identity', 209.
[18] Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 'Place and Identity', 208, 215.
[19] Inge, *Place*, 102, quoting the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan.
[20] Gieryn, 'A Space for Place', 465.
[21] Inge, *Place*, 20, 26; Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 148–9.
[22] Inge, *Place*, 130, 16, 26.
[23] Inge, *Place,* 79.
[24] Thomas, *Counting People In*, 33. See also Chris Cook, *Finding God in a Holy Place: Explorations of Prayer in Durham Cathedral* (London: Mowbray, 2010), 7.

known, sought and wrestled within a place, a memory of that remains'.[25] Following the notion that place is relational, it could also be suggested that place is made sacred by the presence of human encounter or living community. Indeed, a survey that asked almost 5,000 visitors to assess the holiness of the church they were visiting found that 68 per cent saw the church as 'holy'. This was linked to three key factors: namely, the opportunity for personal prayer, the accessibility of information about church services and activities, and the presence of flowers—factors which suggest the presence of human activity.[26] In addition, drawing on my experience of the homeless shelter in Camden, I found that when I returned to the church building after the shelter had finished, my feeling towards the place was transformed: it took on a new significance, linked to my memories of the people who had stayed there.

There are numerous theological sources and themes that could be used to explore this notion of place. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider them all in depth and I have thus chosen to look at a broad range, since they highlight the constant dialectic regarding place.

Looking at the importance of place in Scripture it could be said that, very broadly speaking, the Old Testament affirms the significance of place and the New Testament calls for a transcendence of place.[27] There are specific passages in the Old Testament in which God reveals himself in particular places; the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exod. 3.1–12) and Jacob in Bethel (Gen. 28.10–20) are two examples.[28] There are also wider general themes that suggest the importance of place. Much of the Old Testament narrative revolves around the land, which takes on significance as a 'particular place which has been promised'.[29] The city of Jerusalem also has special significance and the Temple is regarded as the 'holy place' where God especially dwells. Indeed, the 'ark of the Lord' is placed in the 'inner sanctuary' or holy of holies, an enclosed space into which only the priests can enter.[30] However, whilst many passages affirm the importance of the Temple, there are also those that emphasise its role simply as a 'focus' or aid for devotion; God is not limited to it, as expressed in the words of Solomon after he has built the

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[25] Cited in Craig Bartholomew, and Fred Hughes (eds.), *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 208.
[26] Keith Littler, and Leslie J. Francis, 'Research Report. Ideas of the Holy: The Ordinary Theology of Visitors to Rural Churches', *Rural Theology* 3, no.1 (2005), 49, 51.
[27] Note that this is a huge generalisation and the following only gives an overview. I do not seek a normative answer but acknowledge the differing social contexts of the Old and New Testaments, seeking to bring into dialogue two partially culturally conditioned paradigms in Scripture. In this approach I find particularly helpful W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and The Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (California: University of California Press, 1974). More rigorous and critical reflection on specific scriptural texts lies beyond the scope of this essay; especially helpful in relation to the Temple, for example, are Simon DeVries' commentary on 1 Kings (Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary 12 [Texas: Word Books, 1985]) and William Lane's commentary on Hebrews 9–13 (William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47b [Texas: Word Books, 1991]). For a comprehensive overview of place in Scripture, see Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*.
[28] Inge, *Place*, 42.
[29] Inge, *Place*, 35.
[30] 1 Kgs 8.4–11.

Temple.[31] Moreover, there are themes that suggest the importance of moving on and change: Israel is depicted as a pilgrim people, the tent of meeting being portable, wherever it is placed becoming 'holy ground'.[32]

There are specific passages in the New Testament that appear to suggest a call away from fixed places, such as Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in Jn 4.21–24.[33] Wider themes also include a reduced concern for the land and a shift in focus towards the new 'heavenly' Jerusalem 'that is to come'.[34] Moreover, the Temple could be said to lose its significance, being replaced by the person of Christ and his followers, who are the 'living stones'.[35] Hebrews speaks of the way in which Christ has now opened the way for us to enter the 'sanctuary'; through his death Christ has broken through the separating veil, entering 'once for all into the Holy Place'.[36] Once again, however, this is not entirely clear cut; whilst Christ is to replace the Temple as the location of God's presence, opening the sanctuary to all, he still shows affection towards his 'Father's house'.[37]

This tension between place and transcendence of place can also be found in Christian tradition. The rapid growth of pilgrimage to certain 'holy' places thought to bring one closer to God followed closely on the apparent call to transcend place in the New Testament, and was perhaps an example of the human need for placedness.[38] Christians by the fourth century had also begun to attach importance to the places of the burial of saints and there emerged a growing concern with relics.[39] By the eighth and ninth centuries it had become common to bury relics in the altar as a way of establishing a church 'as a sacred place for Christian worship'.[40] Pilgrimage was especially popular in the medieval period but opposed by many writers who saw how it was exploited as a money making enterprise and who questioned the value of going to physical places to find God if his presence is always accessible through his Spirit.[41]

This dialectic is drawn out further in reflection on incarnation and resurrection theology. The particularity of the person of Jesus, the fact that he 'was

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[31] 1 Kgs 8.27. Inge, *Place*, 41–2; Thomas, *Counting People In,* 39; Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 154.

[32] Richard Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: Re-ordering the Church Building for Worship and Mission* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1999), 14–15.

[33] Christopher Lewis, 'The Risen Lord and the Liberation of Place', *Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care* 147 (2005), 34. See also, Mt. 8.20; Lk. 5.11; Acts 1.8.

[34] Heb. 13.14. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 153–4, 178–9.

[35] 1 Pet. 2.4–5. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 294; Inge, *Place*, 93.

[36] Heb. 9.12; 10.19–21. David Deeks, 'Church Building: A Way of Doing Theology', *Epworth Review* 11, no. 2 (1984), 45.

[37] Lk. 2.49. See also, Jn 2.16; 14.2–3. Lewis, 'The Risen Lord', 34.

[38] Inge, *Place*, 93–95.

[39] Bartholomew and Hughes, *Explorations*, 84–5. See also Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity,* The Haskell Lectures on History of Religions New Series 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[40] Douglas Davies, 'Christianity', in Jean Holm and John Bowker (eds.), *Sacred Place* (London: Continuum, 2001), 43.

[41] Bartholomew and Hughes, *Explorations,* 95–6.

geographically conditioned as all men', could be said to show God's 'commitment … to the world of place' and consequently affirm any human desire or need for placed-ness.[42] In the advent of the Word as flesh, the New Testament 'initiates an unprecedented celebration of materiality', affirming the significance of 'place and time for God' in his relationship with humanity. Thus the incarnation could be said to add another layer to discussions regarding the New Testament's attitude to place.[43] Some scholars, however, argue against an 'excessive emphasis on incarnation' and suggest that the resurrection marks a total transcending of place, dealing 'the final blow to any Christian … deference to one place more than another'.[44] The empty tomb shows that Jesus' place is not fixed but is one of 'perpetual departure'.[45]

Ecclesiology may also affect the importance one attaches to place and church buildings. Avery Dulles identifies five main models of church: church as Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald and Servant.[46] These models are helpful in that they provide particular analogies which correspond to the different understandings of church that may be held by a particular individual or community.[47] I would like to suggest that they can also be applied to church buildings. It could be argued, for example, that if one holds the model of church as 'Sacrament,' one may see the value of church buildings as a pointer to the divine, the material being 'a vehicle for the spiritual'.[48] In this case the building will have more than a simply functional role, its purpose being to point beyond.[49] Indeed, it could be argued that there is a two-way process between our ecclesiology and the theology communicated by the building itself, through its architecture and internal arrangement. Large Gothic churches, for example, with their towering pillars, arches and vast space, are designed to 'point heavenwards', their physical structure expressing the 'limitless quality of God'.[50]

One may question, however, whether such typical models, as offered by modern ecclesiology, are sufficient in themselves. It is generally accepted that the Church has two aspects, its primary aspect (the 'spiritual' or 'invisible') being made visible in its secondary aspect (the 'everyday' or 'empirical'). This two fold construal lies behind many of the typical models of church. In the 'Body of Christ' (mystical communion) model, for example, the body (secondary) is the visible expression of Christ

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[42] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 30, 64; Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 335.

[43] Jn 1.14. Inge, *Place*, 51–2, 54.

[44] Lewis, 'The Risen Lord', 34; Harold W. Turner, *From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology and Theology of Places of Worship* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 150–152.

[45] Mt. 28.6–7. Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred,* 30–31; Lewis, 'The Risen Lord', 40.

[46] Avery S.J. Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Reassessment of the Church in all its Aspects* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976).

[47] Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 21–22.

[48] Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 60–3; Inge, *Place,* 76.

[49] David Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 273.

[50] Philip Sheldrake, 'Space and the Sacred: Cathedrals and Cities', *Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care* 147 (2005), 9; Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place,* 273.

(primary).[51] Nicolas Healy refers to such models as 'blueprint ecclesiologies' or 'models of perfection'. By this he means that they express an 'ideal "vision"' of what the Church should become but fail to take into account the present ecclesial reality.[52] In other words, Healy asserts that ecclesiology ought to be a 'practical-prophetic' discipline, not concerned simply with creating 'theoretical constructions' but with responding to the Church's context by reflecting on its 'concrete identity'.[53] Responding to the 'ecclesiological context' means taking into account such factors as a church's history, its past and present form, its economic and social status, its worship style and the story of its community.[54] Thus, rather than starting with an ecclesiological model and applying it to the Church, Healy suggests that one ought to start with the ecclesiological context, allowing that to inform one's ecclesiology.[55] The importance of this may be exemplified by a consideration of the 'Sacramental' model. A church building may point heavenward in its architecture and design but if the context does not affirm this symbolism, if the model does not fit the context, the symbol may loose its validity.[56] Thus, for example, a building that architecturally points heavenward may do so less effectively when inhabited by a community in which there is disunity or strife.

The above analysis drew attention to the significance of place in relation to identity, memory, belonging and wellbeing, and questioned whether there is perhaps a fundamental human need for place. Theological reflection has then served to explore this theme further, drawing attention to the dialectic regarding the importance of place that runs through the theological sources. In the following, I intend to suggest some ministerial outcomes that may flow from a critical correlation of the above; theological reflection will be brought alongside and at points will be critiqued by and critique the findings of my analysis in a way that may serve to reconcile some of the tensions between the Gospel's call for transcendence of place and the significance of place in history and society.

Ministerial Outcomes

Returning to the initial experience, the question emerges as to what action ought to be taken when faced with the problems of an old church building. Some argue that there remains no option but to 'leave behind … our crumbling edifices' and it is certainly the case that there are situations when old church buildings have to be closed.[57] I would like to suggest, however, that there first needs to be a continuing dialogue between:

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[51] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28–30.

[52] Healy, *Church*, 36–37.

[53] Healy, *Church*, 21–22, 149.

[54] Healy, *Church*, 38–39.

[55] Healy, *Church*, 39, 158.

[56] Healy, *Church*, 50; Susan White, 'The Theology of Sacred Space', in David Brown and Ann Loades (eds.), *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London: SPCK, 1995), 42.

[57] Rob Frost, *Which Way for the Church?* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997), 47.

(a) The needs and values of the church congregation;
(b) The physical church building;
(c) An understanding of place.[58]

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                    │   congregation   │
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         ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐
         │ The physical │          │ An understanding │
         │   building   │          │    of place      │
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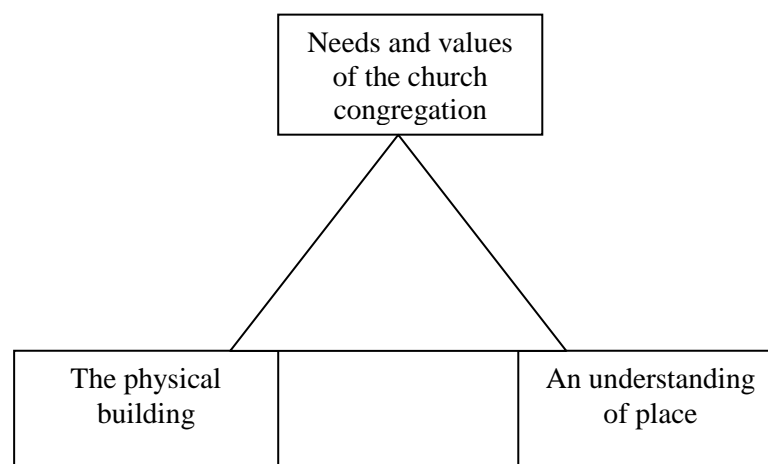
This dialogue draws on the two-way process between (a) the ecclesiological models a church congregation brings to a building and their needs for worship and (b) the theology communicated by the physical church building itself. A congregation's practical needs for worship and the theology they want to express need to engage with the layout and architecture of the church building and the theological message it communicates to people who pass by or who walk in off the street. At the same time there needs to be an engagement with an understanding of place, as explored in the above analysis: what are people's memories of this particular place and how does it contribute to their sense of identity and belonging? There needs to be an awareness that the building may hold special importance for some but also that people's attachment to place may need to be challenged. The question, 'Is community able to flourish in this place?' needs to be asked alongside, 'What is the history?' or 'What are the memories of this place?' It may be important to spend time with the building and listen to its stories if it is to be a good 'servant' to the community.

The dialogue can be extended further by drawing on Healy's 'practical-prophetic' approach to ecclesiology. Before dialogue can occur between (a) and (b), a community may need to explore and critique their inherited model of church and consider the value of alternative models.[59] The ecclesiology they adopt needs to engage with the 'concrete identity' of the Church in its practical context. For example, a community who enter into the dialogue holding a 'Pilgrim' model of church, may need to reflect on this in the light of the context of postmodernity, which has brought about 'fundamental change' in the structure of people's surroundings, causing a need for placed-ness and belonging. In this situation an

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[58] I am indebted to Professor Philip Sheldrake for his suggestions on this matter.
[59] Healy, *Church*, 32, 181; Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 29.

ancient building may speak powerfully of constancy.[60] It is thus important that each aspect of the dialogue is grappled with in the light of the practical ecclesiological and social context.
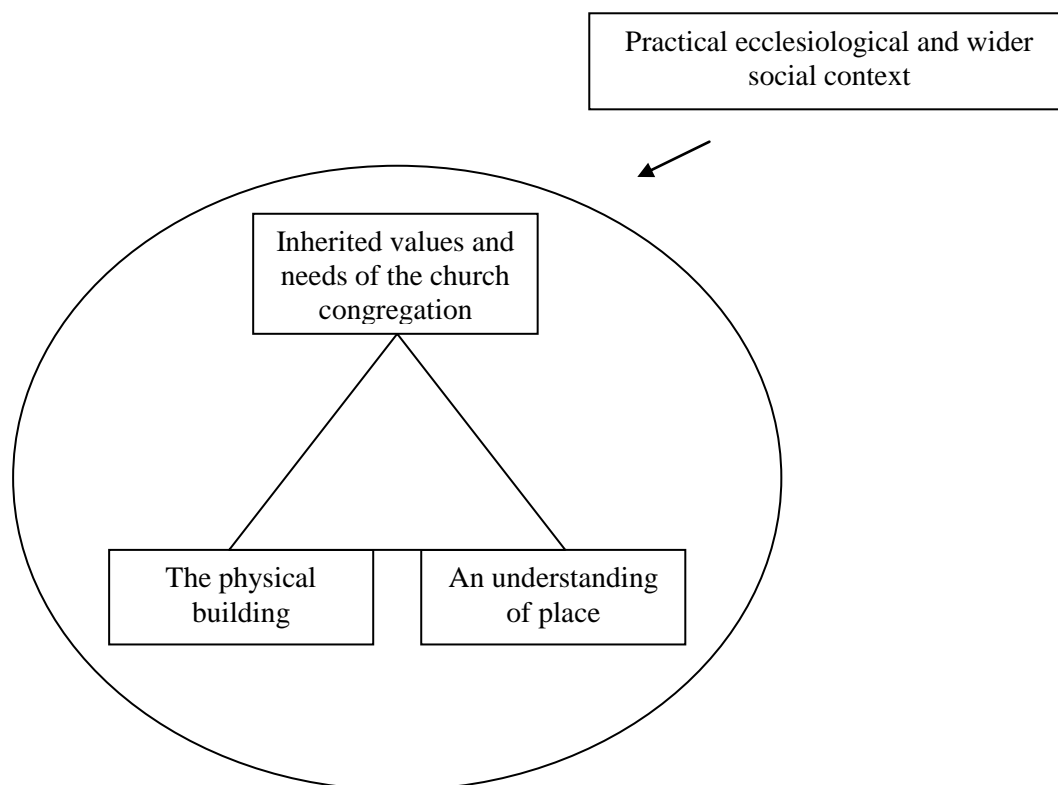
Without such engagement the results of the dialogue may lack authenticity, failing to respond to the actual fallen reality of the Church and the world.[61]

On the basis of this discussion I would like to suggest some specific qualities that could act as a grid for use when considering in practice what should be done with an old church building. These begin to bring together some of the values and tensions that have been noted above.

A church building needs to be:

- A springboard heavenwards.
- An open space.
- A place where 'living community' is found.[62]
- A place where history and memory can be engaged with.
- A place that communicates an appropriate theology.

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[60] Inge, *Place*, 20, 26.
[61] White, 'The Theology of Sacred Space', 42.
[62] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent,* 105.

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                          ┌──────────────┐
                          │  Springboard │
                          │  heavenwards │
                          └──────────────┘
                                 ↑
  ┌──────────────────┐        ╱──────╲        ┌──────────────┐
  │  Appropriate     │ ↖     ╱        ╲    ↗  │  Open space  │
  │    theology      │      │          │      └──────────────┘
  └──────────────────┘       ╲        ╱
                              ╲──────╱
                         ↙              ↘
  ┌──────────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐
  │ History and Memory│                 │ Living Community │
  └──────────────────┘                  └──────────────────┘
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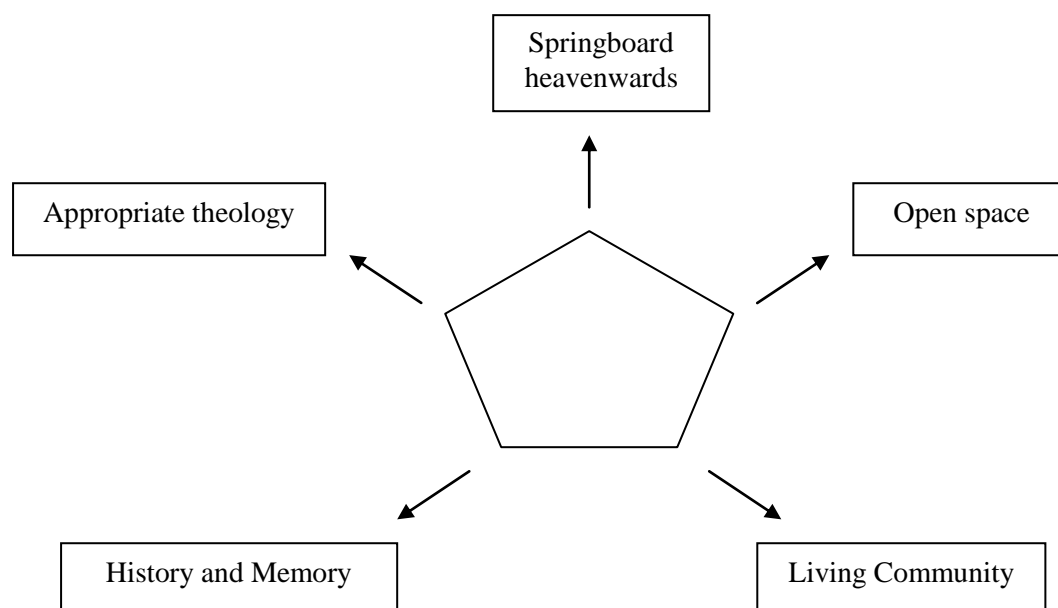
Given the Temple's role as a 'focus' point and the shift towards the 'heavenly' city in the New Testament, and drawing on Sacramental models of church, I would like to suggest that a church building should act as a springboard heavenwards. It should provide a focus but ultimately be 'a pointer to "elsewhere"', enabling 'movement beyond'.[63] It has become apparent that whilst place is important, so is the call to perpetual departure; the building needs to respond to people's need to belong without being constrictive.[64] Possible ways of achieving this practically could be through the existing symbolism and beauty of a building's art and architecture, enhanced by the use of floodlighting or stone cleaning to achieve a sense of the luminous.[65] In addition, a sense of both immanence and transcendence can be achieved through the creation of a series of spaces, each having a particular focus. David Stancliffe suggests that a single room, in particular a circular space, suggests God's presence in the 'here and now', whilst a 'succession of rooms' may suggest a sense of transcendence and movement beyond.[66] This could be created by the use of glass screens or changes in flooring.[67]

The concept of open space draws on the imagery from Hebrews; a church building should be 'liberated space', accessible, available, inclusive and open to all.[68] One way of achieving this may be through the use of glass doors, allowing visibility, and the maintenance of windows, allowing in natural light. St Silas' Church, one of the churches in the Byker project, has automatic glass doors, which are inviting to those

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[63] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred,* 30. Sheldrake, 'Space and the Sacred', 9.
[64] Lewis, 'The Risen Lord', 40–41.
[65] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent,* 106.
[66] David Stancliffe, 'Creating Sacred Space: Liturgy and Architecture Interacting', in David Brown and Ann Loades (eds.), *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London: SPCK, 1995), 44–48, 53.
[67] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, 126.
[68] Lewis, 'The Risen Lord', 42.

coming in from outside.[69] It has also inserted a glass screen between the main body of the church and a space provided for social activities. Churches could also take the risk of leaving their doors open more often and put up signs giving clear invitation into the building. St Michael's achieved this in their shop front: the doors are open to all and the windows allow people to look in easily, being able to see when a service is happening. Openness may also be achieved by the internal arrangement of the space, such as the removal of dividing screens and clutter, and the use of good lighting.[70]

The notions of relational place and the New Testament focus on the Body of Christ as the 'living stones' lie behind the suggestion that a building should be a place of living community. The use of the building for events other than worship, such as a homeless shelter or the simple provision of hospitality, would enable this.[71] A sense of living community could further be promoted by placing evidence within the building of the events taking place; notice boards with photos can achieve this adequately.

The importance of providing a place in which history and memory can be engaged with draws primarily on the psychological studies of the analysis and the consideration of what makes place sacred. It can be achieved simply by providing details of the story of the church building on notice boards and leaflets. It may also be helpful to engage with and record the older congregation members' memories of the place and to tell the faith story of the community.[72] Attention could also be drawn to physical reminders of the past, such as decolourisation and variations in brick work, which could be left uncovered.[73]

The final quality I suggest is drawn from reflection on ecclesiology and the two-way process outlined above. Richard Giles observes how buildings 'speak'; a shabby or ill maintained church, for example, may seem inhospitable, suggesting a lack of care on the part of the congregation.[74] A church building needs to reflect adequately the theology of the congregation and this can be achieved primarily through the interior layout.[75] The placing of pews in the round, for example, communicates a sense of community in our postmodern and fluid age.

It is unlikely that any building will express each of these categories in equal proportion and some will only be possible after extensive renovation. However, if a building shows little sign of any of these categories, and cannot be adapted to do so,

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[69] See also Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place*, 337.

[70] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent,* 108, 113, 130.

[71] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent,* 129.

[72] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, 64–6. A good example of a community engaging positively with their church's history is that of Faversham Parish Church: See John Davies, *et al.* (eds.), 'Heritage Counts 2009' (English Heritage, 2009), http://hc.english-heritage.org.uk/content/pub/HC09_England_Acc.pdf (5 January 2012), 10.

[73] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, 109.

[74] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, 59. MacCulloch, 'Church Building', 55.

[75] Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, 67.

it may be necessary to close. Returning to the case studies: in the situation of St Hilda's, whilst the building did have much potential, the large scale project required for the maintenance of the building was felt to be unfeasible and the decision to close ultimately necessary. Indeed, fresh expressions of church in the locality have developed since the closure and there is widespread consensus that the Anglican community in Ryton is a great deal stronger as a result of the merging of St Hilda's congregation with Holy Cross. Alternatively, in the case of St Michael's, extensive changes to the building are now being made so that the building itself can become a thriving centre for both the congregation and the wider community.

The question arises as to whether any of the factors of the grid should be given priority. An in depth exploration of this would require putting the outcomes into practice in a concrete church setting. However, the analysis highlighted that place by definition involves human encounter and, in light of this, it could be said that 'living community' ought to be the most heavily weighted of the factors in the grid. Indeed, without evidence of living community one may question the validity of the other factors. Can a building authentically be a springboard to the divine or communicate an appropriate theology if it is not expressing community adequately?

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