

Filling the Religious Void: But with What?

A Strategic Event Management Approach to Eventization of Decommissioned and Deconsecrated Faith Spaces

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Abstract

In the European landscape, church buildings are visible reminders of local communities' cultural roots, shaping their cultural heritage. Yet demographic, religious and social changes have led to the abandonment of religious spaces across the continent. Conferences have been held, from Nordic countries to the Vatican, Catholic and Protestant, asking "Does God not live here anymore?" Yet these symposia focus on the "what". What physically can we do with these spaces? How can we adapt them to new purposes? But rarely is any consideration given to what follows. Having studied over fifty churches across Europe, from Belgium to Poland, Sweden to Italy, it is evident that a primary use of adapted churches is for events. This venuefication (Dowson and Lamond 2018) meets a growing need for event venues, for use by secular organisations, faith groups and businesses. Yet little consideration is given to the strategic development of these sacred spaces from professional or academic event management perspectives. This paper proposes the adoption of a strategic eventization of faith process (Dowson 2025) that enables local organisations to develop their own decommissioned or deconsecrated faith spaces, balancing cultural and religious values, appreciating the theological distinctions between and within denominations. Undertaking cultural risk assessments (Albert, Dowson and Lomax 2025) facilitates the creation of more inclusive and welcoming event spaces, addressing new dilemmas facing those who want to utilise them. Lacking in cultural and theological capital, event producers experience challenges attempting to introduce culturally relevant activities into abandoned sacred spaces. Consideration of the specialist context of use beyond the physical transformation of abandoned sacred buildings enables encounter with complexities that otherwise remain unseen—legal, spiritual, theological, and cultural. Reaching beyond appropriation of physical space, this paper applies the concept of 'palimpsest', when a progression of changes masks former structures, functionality, meaning and design purposes.

Keywords: Church Venues, Cultural Risk Assessment, Eventization of Faith

Introduction

This paper addresses the question of why in-depth consideration is needed of the specialist context of the use of decommissioned and deconsecrated churches beyond the physical transformation of buildings 'abandoned' by diminishing faith communities. Academic discourse on this topic is mainly (indeed, almost wholly) from religious and heritage

perspectives, and focuses on developments in architectural change. In Europe, related symposia and conferences have been hosted by the Vatican and by Protestant Nordic churches, whilst a secular view has been promoted by the Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), a European-based non-faith organisation that works to protect religious heritage across the continent.

Having participated in five such events, this author is concerned that the focus on buildings from an architectural vantage point disregards a crucial element, which is: “What happens next?” The “Preserve, Use and Develop’ conference in Lund, Sweden in April 2018, and the European conference on ‘Sustainable Religious Heritage’ four years later, also in Lund, were led by Protestant churches in collaboration with FRH. The major contribution has been consideration of examples of building transformation, presented by architects specialising in this area. The message “look what we’ve done to this building’ belies a future that is considerably more complex, and which deserves reflection and deeper examination. From a Roman Catholic perspective, the Vatican has also instigated similar events, initially through the Pontifical Council for Culture (now the Dicastery for Culture and Education), which have sought to address the very real issues facing the Catholic Church on a global level, and to collaboratively create policy with input from diverse participants. Asking the question, “Dio non abita più qui?” (“Does God not live here anymore?”) in November 2018, a Vatican conference faced the reality of identifying a common global policy approach to those churches that are decommissioned, i.e. no longer licensed for use for worship. The very concept of a deconsecrated Catholic church building is almost anathema; this theological conundrum is different from most Protestant and reformed Christian traditions. This event was followed in May 2022 by a second conference, ‘Charism and Creativity’, for religious communities (i.e. convents and monasteries) to strengthen networks and share best practice as they face declining numbers (Dowson 2024). In November 2023, the Nordic Protestant churches met in the School of Architecture of Oslo University to ask “Bor ikke Gud her lenger?” (“Does God not live here anymore?”), reflecting on architectural examples that might support adapted use, especially for their historic rural Stave churches. In each of these five events, the rare non-architectural contributions considered heritage elements, but only one discussed the (almost inevitable) events uses of these spaces.

The focus on events results from the primary purposes of adaptive reuse of decommissioned and deconsecrated churches; whilst these include housing, commerce and business, a prominent function is to provide venues for cultural activities, including events. Such activities may be community-led or even commercial, but this approach requires specialist and strategic events input. As more sacred spaces become non-sacred through adaptation, the theological impacts and influences are complex, with distinct differences between different denominations and traditions. These differences define whether, or to what extent, such sacred spaces are able to be desacralized. Where future uses include the will to provide sustainable resources for local communities and parishes, multifunctionality complexifies the result. Two questions arise: How is a church different from any other event venue? And: how is a former (adapted use) church different from any other event venue? This paper aims to identify some of the complications that arise and point towards a strategic and professional event management perspective for solutions.

Influences on Adapted Use of Faith Spaces

This paper presents several concepts and models that emerge from academic and practitioner dialogues between events and theology that influence adapted reuse of faith spaces. This discussion aims to engage with those responsible for directing architectural developments in adaptive reuse of faith spaces and former faith spaces, especially churches, to encourage an appreciation of the relevance of this interdisciplinary potential. The external factors that influence the use of churches for events, whether abandoned or not, whether overtly adapted or not, provide a fascinating context for architectural changes that impact on future use. These factors are discussed in more depth, and include demographic changes, secularization, the wider eventization of society, and venuefication, that have influenced the growth of eventization of faith. This paper later considers the complexities of becoming an event venue, as theological perspectives and differences influence the development of churches as venues for events.

For decades, the dominant academic discourse in the West has focused on an anticipated demise of (traditional) Christianity, evidenced by the closure of active churches, as congregations have depleted and local communities continue to change. However, this dominant discourse can increasingly be challenged by recent faith developments. As recognised by Pew Research (2022), the majority of church growth occurs in the Global South, but also appears in the West in ethnically diverse communities and through innovative forms of church communities in traditional denominations.

Demographic changes at local and global levels are influencing the need for faith spaces. Local ethnic diversity, especially that which results from immigration (often from the Global South), proselytism and interfaith marriage (Loewenthal 1995), has influenced growth within local religious communities, both Christian and Muslim. Many of these diverse faith communities have integrated into local contexts, whilst some retain national, ethnic and cultural connections. Today in cities and towns across the North of England (such as Bradford), Sudanese, Farsi and Nepali congregations can be found within Church of England and other denominational structures, as well as separate Chinese churches, mirroring the establishment in the same city of the distinctive Italian, Ukrainian and Polish migrant communities' churches of the early to mid-20th century.

The turn away from traditional denominations has been linked to the growth of a 'spirituality' lifestyle in the West, along with the development of ethnic and cultural groupings of Christians. Pew Research (2022) estimates that by 2050 Christianity will still be growing, and will still be the dominant world religion, followed by Islam (also growing). Perhaps surprisingly, this research foresees the reduction in numbers and proportion of those identifying as having no faith. Whilst these changes are largely driven by growth in the Global South, the diversity of Western countries and communities is strengthening both Christianity and Islam. The recent post-pandemic phenomenon of GenZ inquirers into traditional Christianity is also likely to become a factor. Thus, whilst Christian denominations have been aware of the impacts of secularization in the past 70 years, the future looks potentially very different, with implications for the use and reuse of churches and associated spaces.

The later 20th and early 21st centuries have been characterised by the eventization of society, influenced by the growth of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 2011), as consumers

move from amassing possessions to acquiring experiences (Wood 2009). The venuefication of non-specialist event spaces has resulted from this wider eventization, including the hire of churches and their associated spaces for events. This trend to venuefication (Dowson and Lamond 2018), whereby it is possible for almost anywhere to become an event venue, is complexified by the conflicts that arise out of the primary functions of these spaces and their events use. For example, if access to a public park is put aside for an event, the facility is then not available for use by the public throughout the build, event, and break down stages, thereby removing a valuable community facility. Such events often result in inconvenience to local residents and damage to public property, whether intentional or not, as footfall and equipment (such as stages) impact the ground. For spaces and buildings with a different primary purpose (i.e. not events, or a specific type of event), their primary purpose impacts on these uses (Hassanien and Dale 2011). These venues are known as 'hybrid' or multipurpose venues, when they are utilised for event purposes or for events that are not their primary purpose. The primary purpose is always dominant; for example, when a UK football club is hired for a conference, the wishes of UEFA or the Football Association override any commercial contracts, plans, or relationships in place, even at short notice. (As a professional event manager this was the experience of the author). However, for sacred spaces (including decommissioned and deconsecrated churches), the primary purpose influences potential content and timings, as well as users. Therefore, becoming an event venue when it is not the primary purpose of a space or place holds specific significance for faith spaces in a different and more complex way than for other multipurpose venues. This is because of the influence of theology.

Venuefication is key to the uses to which adapted buildings are put, whether intentionally for events or not. Because today anywhere can be a venue, almost all the primary purposes that adapted buildings have may result in their subsequent emergence into a venue space, even temporarily. Therefore, an appreciation of event and venue management (Dowson Albert and Lomax, 2026) along with strategic and cultural factors (Albert, Dowson and Lomax 2025) is vital for the creation of culturally congruent facilities that also consider environmental sustainability and appropriate ecological factors in the planning of re-use.

However, theological aspects of the use of sacred spaces for events, especially by non-faith organizations or for non-religious event purposes, differ widely between denominations and faiths. Dowson's eventization of faith model (Dowson 2025) maps the different strategic and operational events elements. These elements can each be influenced, separately and collectively, by variations in denominational and individual church perspectives on defining sacred space, which prescribes what activity is appropriate within that space. Venuefication and wider strategic elements of the eventization of faith model connect with Baker-Brown and Brooker's (2024) focus on the influences of context, continuity and site of adaptive reuse across secular and religious buildings. Meanwhile, Coomans (2019; 2024) highlights the complexities in achieving the aim of continuity of use and cultural expression for both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, in the context of adaptive reuse of sacred buildings. Coomans (2019; 2024) provides examples of the challenges of adaptive reuse into multifunctional spaces and post-intervention management in Meteora (Greece), Quebec (Canada) and Breda (Netherlands). Danckers and Aerts (2024) present Flanders examples, including 12th century Leuven Park Abbey, repurposed as a multifunctional site. The boundaries between sacred and non-sacred spaces and activities within those spaces

combine three elements. Firstly, the acceptability of an event, an individual or corporate hirer, is limited by the theology of sacred space that pertains to the church's denomination, but it is also influenced by local organizational perspectives and conditions, including facilities and resources. This aspect is particularly influenced by the church's theological tradition, its leadership and its members. Secondly, the suitability of the space incorporates the existence of shared values between the event space owners (i.e. the church) and users (i.e. event participants and organizers). This can impact on event content and event purposes, with special focus on the potential impact on managing the corporate reputation of the venue (i.e. the church). Finally, feasibility requires that the facilities and resources meet minimum thresholds and capability requirements (this could be as simple as whether there are toilets). The practical fit with the timings of regular and planned church activities is a vital element here.

Canon law provides helpful guidance, although it must be noted that this varies from one denomination to another. A key element of theological perspectives on sacred space is the existence of distinctive doctrinal and canon law differences between on the one hand, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, compared to those of reformed and Protestant denominations. For the former, this translates into belief in actual presence rather than the symbolic presence of the divine. The impact on space is that sacrality lies perpetually within the space (or buildings, or objects), rather than transitorily in the space (focusing on people as carriers of sacrality). The impact of this dichotomy on the concept of eventization of faith is significant in the context of adaptive use. Events held in faith spaces are influenced by the values, theological perspectives and decision-making processes of specific churches and their associated buildings. Theological differences result in starkly contrasting approaches to what is (or is not) acceptable events activity. This issue is often obscured due to failure to make informed strategic considerations about the use of buildings for purposes other than licensed worship. A more strategic approach can be achieved through the application of the eventization of faith process model (Dowson 2025).

Innovative tools such as the Cultural Risk Assessment (Dowson, Albert and Lomax 2025) can facilitate considerations to enable the development of more inclusive spaces and events. Identifying what inclusion looks like is paramount for the venue and event owners, and combined with application of the interactive strategic eventization of faith process will enable each organization to gain a critical perspective of its own values and requirements, taking into account theological differences and organizational contexts.

Extended and Adapted Use of Sacred and Associated Faith Spaces for Events

This section outlines examples (illustrated in Fig. 1) that present potential and actual conflicts and issues which can arise from the use of sacred spaces (and former sacred spaces) for events. Adaptations may have changed the layout, but the theological implications of this extended use vary between denominations. Yet whatever the theological tradition, the content of the events has significance in terms of meeting acceptability and suitability requirements.

On a study tour of the area around Marburg, Germany over ten years ago with FRH colleagues, it was evident that many former church buildings (whether Catholic or Protestant), were transformed for use as community resources, with particular focus on providing venues for events for local residents, under control of the local community.

Meanwhile, in Sweden, an evening social event (part of a conference), was held in an adapted former church, with waiters serving wine and other alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks from the sanctuary, across the communion rail. Whilst this former church was deconsecrated, and its adaptations included art installations, the incongruity of participants drinking alcohol as the guest speaker made their presentation from the pulpit (six feet above contradiction), was evident to some of those present. Yet in Venice, Italy, a piano concert seemed perfectly acceptable, as the lines between sacred and profane are blurred once more. England, however, offers another perspective. The Churches Conservation Trust is responsible for managing and caring for hundreds of decommissioned and deconsecrated churches mostly for the Church of England.

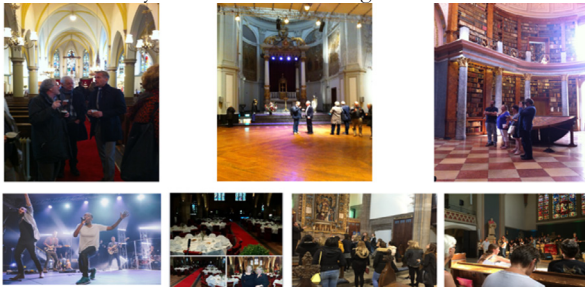


Fig. 1. Examples of events uses in consecrated, deconsecrated, and decommissioned European churches (by permission Ruth Dowson)

Despite these former sacred spaces often being used for events, there are still activities that are not appropriate, not in keeping with the values and former uses of the space. Meanwhile, some active churches (and cathedrals) have found themselves hitting the headlines by allowing commercial hirers to hold events that would be deemed inappropriate by many people. This is frequently due to lack of professional events expertise, combined with low levels of cultural competence and inadequate theological awareness of the potential impacts of event content. Professional event management skills and processes (Dowson, Albert & Lomax 2026) and tools such as the Cultural Risk Assessment (Albert and Dowson and Lomax 2025) should be introduced to this end, in order to avoid reputational risk from the embarrassment of photographs with half naked Chippendales cavorting around a church being shared on social media, or interviews by senior clergy on national radio arguing that silent discos are allowable because the participants will somehow absorb something of the sacred simply by being in the space. If only it was that simple.

Becoming an Event Venue: Issues and Approaches

In becoming an event venue, the process of adaptive reuse does not end with the physical transformation of the building. But any changes may erase what was there before, whether in physical terms or through loss of meaning, history and identity. The concept of palimpsest is helpful in this context (Coomans 2019); whilst many church buildings are old, their current use often does not represent their original uses or forms, and new uses can add new meanings. The progression of changes may partially or fully modify existing structures, functionality or design purpose. Over centuries, the cultural identity of church buildings has been subject to significant transformations and modifications,

blurring historical authenticity, as more recent developments overwhelm earlier theological, architectural and operational aspects. The contestation of sacred spaces (and even their associated non-sacred spaces) results from theological concerns that impact planning and delivery of events and which are rarely considered by those involved in the process.

Whilst many Christian churches are increasingly reliant on income from commercial use to fund worship activities and the expenses that accompany running a building (particularly heating, but also the maintenance of old or ancient facilities), such activities will continue to arise and cause complications, threatening reputations. Tools such as the eventization of faith strategic process model, and the Cultural Risk Assessment can support faith communities in identifying and overcoming such obstacles. Integrating events expertise into the process of venue management is vital: it is only by incorporating professional events knowledge that problems can be mitigated or avoided. On a simple practical level, this means knowing the difference between the type of chairs that might comfortably be used for a seven-hour conference (compared to a one-hour service on a Sunday), buying stackable chairs, and having space to put surplus chairs when not in use.

For churches, there needs to be an element of theological input into the future (events) uses that might follow physical adaptation. Such theological input influences agreed values to guide future use; developing policies enables clarity about what are and are not suitable users or use. Knowing what in-house resources are available and the cost of their use (or procurement and provision of specific event support supplies) facilitates the development of a quality venue. The adaptation and adoption of event planning processes (Dowson and Albert and Lomax 2026) within the boundaries of canon law enable a more professional event delivery. Yet the religious void needs to be filled with authenticity, with meaningful activities and events that reflect the current—or former—nature of the space. This means venue managers and potential users both need to develop levels of cultural competence and theological understanding alongside professionalism in events.

Conclusions

The eventization of faith process model (Dowson 2025) offers an intentional structured approach to the utilisation of events as part of expressions of faith. Ontological demonstration of faith is visible through the lives of faith adherents, especially through the medium of events, and the challenges that people of faith experience are influenced by this vital cultural form. The wholesale integration of events into our way of life triggered an explosion of demand for new venues including hybrid venues; this venuefication has prompted and enabled some churches to adapt their spaces to become event venues, moving beyond the religious or spiritual sphere into commercial and wider community use. However, as has been argued here, this extended use of sacred spaces can and often does lead to conflicts, as different theological perspectives and local contexts result in complex outcomes and challenges. The lack of input from professional event and venue managers at the planning stages of physical adaptations and beyond, adds further dissonance. The lack of deep understanding of cultural differences and their impacts on the use of faith spaces for events can be mitigated by utilising innovative tools such as the Cultural Risk Assessment, but would be further strengthened by the development of cultural competence and cultural intelligence by professionals from disciplines including events management, architecture and heritage as well as theology. If denominational, national and local organisations are

able to develop their own active licensed, decommissioned or deconsecrated faith spaces, balancing cultural and religious values, and appreciating the theological distinctions between and within denominations, the outcomes of adapted use can become less problematic.

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