

Faithful Property Stewardship - A Bible Study from the Church Property Resource Hub



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

Welcome and Gratitude

We welcome and thank you for participating in this Faithful Property Stewardship Bible Study, which we hope will invite you to see your land and buildings with new eyes. Faithful stewardship of church property looks different in the 21st century, and many congregations may feel overwhelmed by the expense and labor of caring for buildings that sit emptier than they did 20, 30 or 50 years ago. Opening ourselves to God's imagination about the future of our churches and property is no small task; we appreciate your acceptance of our invitation to dream with us, with each other and with God.

What is the Church Property Resource Hub?

The Church Property Resource Hub (CPRH) equips congregation and synod leaders with the expertise that will empower congregations to continue to steward their buildings and land as a witness to the gospel.

This initiative was created in response to questions and needs voiced by synods and congregations regarding the use, management and support of church-held property.

Sign up for the “**Church Property Resource Hub Newsletter**” for the latest news and resources at www.elca.org/CPRH or the QR code.



This Study's Components

There are **four sessions** in this study, each with a corresponding guide. The guides are written for ease of use. Please note that directions for the leader appear in italic type.

Because participating in this study is an act of faith, each session is grounded in Scripture and prayer. You may use the opening and closing prayer verbatim or adapt them for your group.

Each session begins with a word of **welcome**, to be read aloud by the leader or a volunteer, and continues with a **story of property transformation**, to be read either silently by the group or aloud by the leader or a volunteer. Participants will then pair up to reflect on the story and where they see God at work. Rather than choose a friend or family member, each participant should seek out someone they do not know and find a new partner for each session.

We've provided a **Scripture** reading and **discussion questions** for each session. To encourage lively, intimate discussion, break up into smaller groups of four to five individuals. A **closing reflection question** gives the whole group a chance to hear insights from the small-group discussions.

The four sessions run about an hour each and should be completed in numerical order. The curriculum is adaptable for various settings — a midweek Lenten study, a Sunday educational hour, an online session and so on. Included with each session is an optional **“Listening to Our Property” activity** (to be completed in about half an hour) that allows participants to apply the discussion to their church's land and buildings.

The final session, “What Is God Dreaming for Our Building?,” incorporates an **in-person activity** for participants to explore their own buildings and grounds as an anchor for discussion. This session should be conducted on-site and may need to be scheduled differently from the previous sessions to maximize participation. God bless you on your journey!

Session 1: What is Good Soil?

Grounding Our Journey in Prayer

Leader: Welcome to this foundational lesson on faithful stewardship. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation, equipping us to lead reflective, collaborative discussions in our congregation. As we begin, know that your openness and leadership are vital to nurturing new possibilities for our church and community.

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Leader: We believe in a God who is always doing a new thing, who can bring even dry bones to life. God invites us to imagine how our hands — and our assets — can do God’s work in our communities. Our congregation’s land and buildings are resources that we can use to live out God’s call for our church, but it’s not easy. Maintenance is expensive. Congregation membership is shrinking. The offering plate and annual pledges don’t always cover our expenses. Our neighbors may not value our church. Yet we know that the Holy Spirit is moving.

The ELCA and our sibling denominations are being challenged to look at church property with new eyes and get creative about how we use, manage and finance our land and buildings. Congregations across the United States are experimenting with new models of stewardship, transforming not only their property but their congregations and neighborhoods. This study invites us into conversation about how our facilities might still facilitate the work of God. Let us pray...

Loving Creator, you call on your people to think beyond obstacles and restrictions, beyond history and tradition, beyond “how it’s always been.” Help us be faithful disciples who dream as big as you do. We give thanks for the land and buildings that you have charged us with, and remind us that they are not ours, but yours. Be with each of us as we open our imaginations about what these resources can be used for. We give thanks for all the people who have called this land home, all who have stewarded it in honor of our shared Creator. May we also be good and faithful stewards. May our thoughts and words be honest, insightful, and faithful. We give thanks for each other as siblings in Christ, help us to strengthen each other in all that we say and do. Amen.

Inspiring Story of Property Transformation

Leader: Real-world stories of transformation can spark our imaginations and offer practical guidance for our own congregation. Through others' experiences, we can discover new possibilities, approaches and visions for property use. As you engage with the following story, look for both inspiration and practical lessons that we can adapt to our unique context.



Paintings by Messejah Washington are displayed in First Presbyterian's narthex. Washington is one of the many artists in residence who both create and exhibit in the church. Photo: Sarah Jones

From Fallow Field to Wildflower Garden: First Presbyterian Cultivates a Community of Artists

If you were to walk past First Presbyterian Church of Chicago ("First Church") five years ago, you might have thought it a hollow reminder of a once-thriving church. There were holes in the sanctuary's stained-glass windows. An adjacent lawn was overgrown and dotted with dried-up flowers. The enormous building was empty nearly every day. But when the Rev. David Black arrived at First Church from New York City in 2020, he saw potential waiting to be tapped. Pastor Black was coming to the South Side of Chicago from Manhattan's Judson Memorial Church, whose congregation had transformed its building into a vibrant arts hub serving artists of every medium and inspiration. "In churches, I usually saw high institutional art," Pastor Black says. "Judson embraced those at the fringe. ... It illuminated how embracing the fullness of artists does so much for our theological imagination."

Artists are natural partners for congregations with excess space. Not only do they have the imagination and resourcefulness to use buildings in a different way; they often need a local, affordable space in which to create, rehearse, exhibit or perform. Churches often have the kinds of spaces that artists need, though congregations may not immediately think of that possibility.

First Church had three floors of unused classrooms and offices, four performance spaces, a gymnasium and a commercial-grade kitchen. Many people saw these underutilized rooms as a sad reminder of the church's past, but Pastor Black and members of the congregation saw an opening to do what Judson had done — become a home for artists.

It didn't take long for the Spirit to affirm Pastor Black's vision. One warm day in 2021, an interdisciplinary artist named Max Li decided to bike to a cemetery on the South Side and happened to pass First Church. He was struck by its gothic-style architecture and had stopped to photograph the church when Pastor Black emerged. "He immediately invited me for a tour of the building," says Li.



Students with 773 Dance Project practice in First Presbyterian's gym. 773 Dance Project provides dance instruction to kids and adults on the South Side of Chicago. Photo: 773 Dance Project.

As Li walked the halls, he was dumbstruck by the number and quality of spaces. In the market for a low-cost studio, he soon became the church's first artist in residence. "The church was in great shape," says Li. "It was just frozen." He began bringing in friends and other artists as subjects for a tintype photography project and would give each of them a tour of the facilities. They were similarly awestruck, and over several months, artists of many disciplines began activating the building spaces for everything from dance classes to oil painting to concerts.

First Church is now a bustling building, alive with volunteers, artists and community programs seven days a week. In addition to artists, the church hosts two weekly feeding programs, an arts nonprofit serving differently abled adults and a food entrepreneur who manages its kitchen. Most of these users found the church through word of mouth or relationships with Li or Pastor Black. In April 2025, the church served as a venue for the citywide art fair EXPO CHICAGO, and more than a thousand visitors came through the doors for curated openings, fashion shows, house-music concerts and other events that breathed creative life into the building. Chicago's public radio station and local news outlets have shared First Church's story as an example of how churches and artists can create mutually beneficial partnerships.

The church's relationships with artists and local community groups have created an economy of reciprocity, expanding not just the church's missional reach but also the capacity of its partners. Artists are inherently collaborative and often trade their skills and connect their friends with each other. One artist, who designs and creates clothing, helped repair one of the church's torn stage curtains. Chef Dozzy, who manages the kitchen, collaborated with church members and the local food distribution group to offer a "Sunday Rice" community dinner once a month. Li and other artists create art for worship services and hold classes for church members. First Church is collaborating with some of its partners to apply for a grant that will help restore the community greenhouse on its lot.

For Pastor Black, the contrast between the church now and when he arrived is stark. He describes the church of 2020 as a "fallow field." "Five percent of the building was used 5% of the week by 26 members who had been through a rough decade," he says. "There were no policies, no manuals. The church had a name, but the institution had died. All this growth has been from that death." He sees the death of the institution creating the possibility of new life, just as dying plants regenerate the soil. "We just started planting a garden with the artists, and now we're seeing what thrives in this community."

The artists and building are definitely thriving, and thanks to the church's new life as an arts hub, the congregation is being transformed. As with the artists, First Church is becoming new by attracting less traditional members. "In Sunday worship, we get some visitors who are lifelong Presbyterians, but they often disappear," says Black. "We also get people who have never been to church in their lives. ... They're here to be tourists, or they're here to be ironic. But they keep coming back, and they join the church." Like wildflower seeds being blown by the wind, folks of all backgrounds are finding a home in the building, and the church is blooming with possibilities.



The First Presbyterian Church of Chicago uses its sanctuary to host concerts, art installations and lectures. Of the entire building, this space is one of those most used by artists and other partners. Photo: Chicago Architecture Center

Max Li offers a different metaphor to describe his experience of First Church's transformation. "There's a proverb in which an emperor asks four blind sages to tell him what an elephant is — they can only describe it in parts." Li sees the artists, the congregation and the other building users each bringing their specific visions to the church. "When we stay within our own disciplines, we can only understand what is in front of us. We need each other to see the bigger picture."

Li's part of that vision has made him an advocate for church-artist partnerships. He is now the "arts czar" of First Church and the primary cultivator of partnerships in the building. Though few of the building users, including Li, identify as Christian or attend Sunday service, they see themselves as part of a larger church community and a broader vision.

As First Church's profile continues to grow in Chicago, Li and Pastor Black are often asked for advice from other congregations seeking new life and transformation for their old, empty buildings. Pastor Black tells them to release their grip on their past selves — to let go and let God. "God has a plan for churches right now," Pastor Black says. "We're not really in control. The church isn't ours, and it never was." Pastor Black hopes that more congregations will lean into their discomfort about sharing space and embrace the imaginations of artists, just as First Church has.

Reflect on these questions:

1

What parts of the story resonated with you? Why?

2

Where do you hear the Spirit moving in the story? Where was God at work?

3

What memories or stories of your church does this remind you of?



Volunteers with Market Box — a mutual aid food distribution program — package deliveries in First Presbyterian's fellowship hall. First Presbyterian partners with multiple food service and justice groups that use the building every week. Photo Credit: First Presbyterian Church

Biblical Foundations of Stewardship and Transformation

Leader: In this lesson, we will explore the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding and grounds our actions in faith.

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. If you have ears, hear!”

In small groups, after silent reflection time, read and discuss the following:

Any farmer will tell you that soil grows tired after sustaining the same crop through multiple planting seasons. The pH balance shifts, certain nutrients are leached out, and even the texture of the dirt changes. Good soil can become shallow or choked with weeds after years of use. Farmers will often rotate their fields, moving their crop to a different field with more nutrient-dense soil and planting something different in the worn-out field to regenerate its fertility. The farmer never stops sowing seeds; they just change which seeds they sow or where they sow them. This ensures that the whole farm will be healthy and abundant for generations to come.

Agriculture is seasonal — God the Sower goes out in the fields regularly, throwing seeds on all types of ground. Churches also experience seasons — seasons of growth, seasons of decline, seasons of rest. Our seasons are marked not only by numbers, by membership and giving, but also by mission — by projects and programs. In one season, the church’s most important program might be the food pantry; in another, it might be the youth group. This parable is often used to talk about church-planting, about starting new congregations in new places. But maybe we should see our ministry as being continually planted, continually rotated, all in service of a greater abundance.

Consider two or three of the discussion questions below:

What seasons of ministry has our church experienced in the last 20 to 30 years? How was our property utilized during those seasons?

In the story about First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, Pastor Black describes the church as going from a “fallow field” to a “wildflower garden.” What made that church “good soil” for its next season of ministry?

How might thinking about seasons of ministry inform how we use our buildings? Our land?

In the story of First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, the rejuvenation of property and ministry came from outside the church membership. How might we open ourselves to all the seeds God may be sowing?

Reconvene as a large group to reflect. What insights did you gain from the conversations? What are you walking away with?

Sending and Next Steps

Leader: In this lesson, we explored the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Let us carry these insights with us as we guide our congregation, fostering faithful stewardship and openness to God’s renewing work in our community. Let us pray...

O God, you have called your servants to do your work in the world. We don't always see the end of the journey, but we trust the path you have set us on. Give us the faith to venture forth with courage, not knowing where you are leading us but knowing that you are walking beside us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Gratitude for our Learning and Time Together

Leader: Thank you for making time to explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation. As you move forward, carry these tools and insights with you, empowering our community to act boldly, adapt to new opportunities and faithfully steward our church's resources for the future.

To continue your learning in the context of our space, complete the optional activity "Listening to Our Property."

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Session 2: What Does It Mean To Be a Faithful Steward?

Grounding Our Journey in Prayer

Leader: Welcome to this foundational lesson on faithful stewardship. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation, equipping us to lead reflective, collaborative discussions in our congregation. As we begin, know that your openness and leadership are vital to nurturing new possibilities for our church and community.

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Leader: Christ taught us that generosity is central to discipleship. We are called to give, to offer, to apply all our assets and talents to God's work in this world. Christ invites us to experience his love through our offering of who we are and what we have, just as he did. Our congregation's land and buildings are blessings bestowed on us by God and by generations past. At this moment in our lives, in the life of our congregation and in the life of the wider church, we are asked to think about what that generosity looks like.

Generous and faithful Creator, you invite us into your dreams, your plans and your work. Teach us how to change this world to reflect your justice and mercy, and equip us with everything we need to co-create your kingdom on earth. Help us to take up this call with vigor, excited for the new thing we are doing together. We give thanks for all the people who have called this land home, who have stewarded it to honor our shared Creator. May we be good and faithful stewards as well. May our thoughts and words be honest, insightful and faithful. We give thanks for each other as siblings in Christ and pledge to strengthen each other in all we say and do. Amen.

Inspiring Story of Property Transformation

Leader: Real-world stories of transformation can spark our imaginations and offer practical guidance for our own congregation. Through others' experiences, we can discover new possibilities, approaches and visions for property use. As you engage with the following story, look for both inspiration and practical lessons that we can adapt to our unique context.



Vang's sanctuary includes a beautifully preserved organ. The church's commitment to preservation of its history and building is supported by its equally strong commitment to community service. Photo credit: Church Property Resource Hub

Preserving More Than a Building: Vang Lutheran Church Learns How Far Its Ministry Reaches

[Vang Lutheran Church](#) is located outside Dennison, Minn., in the middle of farm country, at least a mile from any major roadway. A pristine white-clapboard church sits atop a lawn bordered by new saplings. You might see steeplejacks hard at work, replacing old boards, or a church member tending the community garden of squash, carrots, beets and potatoes. On Sundays, excited children ring the church bell before and after the service.

Vang's building is hard to find, but its ministry is well known in the towns and communities within a 15-mile radius of the church. Local food pantries receive produce grown in the small, but mighty garden — up to 1,000 pounds each year. Residents connected to the church are supported in times of need by Vang's Care Team, which visits folks who are sick, grieving or in need of some companionship. The Care Team often brings one of the many frozen, homemade meals that members prepare in the church kitchen. Vang is a church that knows how to care for its people and community. "This is a farm church," said Steve Trolley, a dedicated member of the Garden Committee. "We know how to get through tough times together."

In addition to being a farm church, Vang also carries the heritage of its Norwegian immigrant founders. The standing church building was designed by Olaf Hansen the late 19th century, and many of its features recall the traditional stave churches of Norway, including the soaring ceilings, the altar woodwork and the sanctuary's layout in the shape of a cross. The congregation keeps this heritage alive through its annual lutefisk dinner, which attracts hundreds of neighbors every fall.

When the congregation members learned that the steeple was in danger of collapsing, they found a way not only to patch it but also to restore this treasured part of their ancestors' legacy.

The steeple restoration project was a huge undertaking for this small, aging, rural congregation. Members had always been able to find money for urgent repairs, but the steeple would cost more than several of those smaller projects combined. One member who sits on the board of a local historical society learned about a competitive capital grant for churches called the National Fund for Sacred Places. The grant would provide matching funds up to \$100,000, half the amount needed for the project. The Vang leadership decided to apply in 2021, and though they didn't receive the grant, they were encouraged to apply again the next year. "The National Fund team walked us through the application and told us what we could improve," said Pam Kester, who worked on the grant application. "That was really helpful. This was the first grant we'd ever applied for."

Vang strengthened its application by including all the different ways the church benefited its surrounding communities. "It was eye-opening to think about all the ways we were ministering to people," Kester said. "We didn't realize all that we were doing."

In addition to the Care Team's work and the garden's bounty, the lutefisk dinner helps educate and engage people in Norwegian tradition. Over the years, the church has supported more than 40 interns who became Lutheran pastors across the United States, raised money for a local, nonmember family whose child was fighting cancer and partnered with another local Lutheran church to support a full-time pastoral call. Vang's impact and reach impressed the National Fund for Sacred Places, and the church was accepted into the program in 2022.



Vang Lutheran Church, Dennison, Minn., is restoring its iconic steeple as part of a larger renovation project to preserve the church's historic building. The church received a \$100,000 matching grant for its preservation project. Photo: Church Property Resource Hub.

The congregation members were thrilled to have their application accepted, but they knew they had to raise \$100,000 on their own to qualify for matching funds from the program. Vang was the first rural church to be accepted; the other members of their program cohort were large, urban congregations with wealthy donors. “We didn’t know how we were going to do it,” said Rain Kester, who served on the congregation council at the time. “We thought we were starting out way behind everyone else.” But after meeting their cohort members, the Vang leadership were encouraged and excited. “All these churches, even though they’re big, are navigating the same challenges we are,” Kester added. “Membership decline, old buildings, less money in the plate. If they could raise the funds, we could too.”

Vang met and exceeded its fundraising goals in just two years by reaching out to the same folks it had helped in its many decades of ministry. Current members tracked down contact information for former members and made phone calls, telling them about the project and why it was important. They talked to community leaders and organizations, all of whom had been touched by Vang in some way.

Gifts of money, time and talent poured in. Neighbors who weren’t church members donated labor and materials, sponsoring particular parts of the project that they cared about. These donors may not have cared about the steeple, but they were interested in supporting the church. “We didn’t have to do much convincing,” Kester said. “We just had to pick up the phone and call people. A lot of folks were eager to support this place.”

Vang’s successful fundraising for its restoration project has inspired people in and beyond its community. Now at the end of the capital campaign and steeple project, the congregation continues its good work in Southeast Minnesota. It recently called a new pastor whom it shares with Dennison Lutheran Church and is collaborating with other rural parishes to sponsor a shared intern from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

The Rev. Peter Coen-Tuff, interim pastor since July 2025, said he was inspired to take the call by seeing how the church was still serving and dreaming. “They had all these dying trees around their property, so they took them down and planted new ones,” he said. “When you’re planting trees, you’re thinking about the future.” This small congregation knows it can do big things.

Reflect on these questions:

- 1 What parts of the story resonated with you? Why?
- 2 Where do you hear the Spirit moving in the story? Where was God at work?
- 3 What memories or stories of your church does this remind you of?

Biblical Foundations of Stewardship and Transformation

Leader: In this lesson, we will explore the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding and grounds our actions in faith.

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)

A man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. At once the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In small groups, after silent reflection time, read and discuss the following:

In other Gospel stories, Jesus talks about the generosity of people with only a small amount of money or resources versus the stinginess of people who have much. Think of the widow's mite, in which a woman's two coins amount to more than the great tithe of all the rich temple patrons. In this parable, that logic is reversed: the servants that have been given more of their master's wealth use it to make trades whereas the servant who was given less buries his gift in the ground for safekeeping. We empathize with this servant — after all, why take risks with someone else's money? Why isn't preserving and protecting one's treasure, especially a small one, responsible stewardship?

The disconnect between the servant's intention and the master's reaction makes sense only when we see ministry as not transactional but reciprocal. To participate is to give freely and generously, not expecting any specific reward but trusting that our gifts will benefit us by benefiting everyone. For an economy based on reciprocity, the greatest risk and the gravest error is to hoard assets. By not offering our assets, however small they are, we limit the impact we can make on our communities and therefore ourselves. Conversely, giving generously to benefit those beyond our walls and congregations can bring returns that support our ministry and life.

Consider two or three of the discussion questions below:

What assets do we, as a church, tend to give generously? What assets do we tend to protect?

Martin Luther famously said, "If the world ended tomorrow, I would still plant my apple tree." How does generosity intersect with hope?

In the story of Vang Lutheran Church, the congregation was surprised by the impact it had made on the surrounding community and on people now dispersed across the country. In what different ways does our church offer its resources? What might be the impact of that generosity?

Many of our physical and financial assets were passed down to us from previous generations. How might that inheritance complicate and/or inform what we do with those assets?

Reconvene as a large group to reflect. What insights did you gain from the conversations? What are you walking away with?

Sending and Next Steps (5 minutes)

Leader: In this lesson, we explored the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Let us carry these insights with us as we guide our congregation, fostering faithful stewardship and openness to God’s renewing work in our community. Let us pray...

O God, you have invited us into an auspicious and audacious project. On any day, we might feel too tired, too old, too cynical or too poor for this call, but we know that you provide the wisdom, the resources and the grace to see it through. Give us faith to take up the work with joy in our hearts, knowing that you are working beside and among us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Gratitude for our Learning and Time Together

Leader: Thank you for making time to explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation. As you move forward, carry these tools and insights with you, empowering our community to act boldly, adapt to new opportunities and faithfully steward our church’s resources for the future.

To continue your learning in the context of our space, complete the optional activity “If These Walls Could Talk.”

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Session 3: How Can Our Property Embody the Gospel?

Grounding Our Journey in Prayer

Leader: Welcome to this foundational lesson on faithful stewardship. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation, equipping us to lead reflective, collaborative discussions in our congregation. As we begin, know that your openness and leadership are vital to nurturing new possibilities for our church and community.

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Leader: We serve a God who chose to take on human form — to embody grace, love and justice. Jesus' ministry on earth was defined by physical, material, embodied changes in the lives of those he touched. The hungry were fed. The sick were healed. Outcasts found a warm embrace. God invites us to participate in an incarnational faith, always considering how we can make real, physical change in the lives of our neighbors. The land and buildings that our congregation stewards present real, physical opportunities for ministry. At this moment in our lives, in the life of this congregation and in the life of the wider church, we are asked to think about how our property can become an embodiment of the gospel. Let us pray...

Welcoming and loving God, you call us to follow in your footsteps, ministering to the needs and hopes of each other and our neighbors. You inspire us to build a community and a world in which everyone feels warm, safe, fed, comforted and loved. We give thanks for all the ways this land and these buildings have nourished our bodies, minds and spirits. Help us to see everything you have blessed us with as an opportunity to do your work with our hands. We give thanks for all the people who have called this land home, who have stewarded it in honor of our shared Creator. May we also be good and faithful stewards. May our thoughts and words be honest, insightful and faithful. We give thanks for each other as siblings in Christ, help us to strengthen each other in all that we say and do. Amen.

Inspiring Story of Property Transformation

Leader: Real-world stories of transformation can spark our imaginations and offer practical guidance for our own congregation. Through others' experiences, we can discover new possibilities, approaches and visions for property use. As you engage with the following story, look for both inspiration and practical lessons that we can adapt to our unique context.



Trinity's sanctuary provides respite not just for members, but for the residents at Trinity Place. The church opens its whole building for shelter residents, creating a sense of home for the 18 months that they participate in the program. Photo: Trinity Lutheran Church

A Shelter of Hope: Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan Embodies Loving Welcome for Homeless LGBTQIA+ Youth

In December 2005, New York City was cold and wet. Members of Trinity Lutheran Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan were grateful for the warmth of the church as winter set in. But with heavy hearts, they understood that a growing number of unhoused young people were living on the streets in miserable weather.

The Rev. Heidi Neumark, then pastor of the congregation, had preached a sermon inspired by a New York Times story about the rapid rise in the number of LGBTQIA+ youth without housing. Many had left unaccepting hometowns and migrated to New York in search of belonging and the freedom to live authentically. But many ended up without shelter or sufficient income, and the city's shelters offered only 12 beds designated for LGBTQIA+ youth. Trinity members were saddened to learn that these young peoples' dreams were being dashed by harsh reality.

The church had a long history of advocating with LGBTQIA+ neighbors and organizations. During the height of the AIDS crisis, members took the bold step of hosting programs for their neighbors living with HIV, which evolved into a scattered-site housing system in East Harlem. The recent news stories about homeless LGBTQIA+ youth spoke to members' deepest sense of mission — they knew they had to do something.

By 2005, Trinity's membership had declined significantly, and the church was operating at a financial deficit. Members felt called to act but felt they had no resources to offer. What the church did have was space — and a good amount of courage.



Residents prepare their beds every night and bring personal flair to their living space. It's important to Trinity Place that the residents feel at home in the church every evening.

Photo: Trinity Place Shelter

When New York State Pride reached out to churches, asking for shelter space during the coldest months of the year, Trinity answered the call. Vicar Chris Wogaman led the effort. The state would provide bedding and cots, and Trinity would provide overnight supervision, dinner and breakfast. The three-week pilot program was so successful that two Pride members offered to keep the shelter going full-time. Trinity won seed funding for a year, and the congregation began exploring ways to enhance the program.

“This was a huge leap of faith for them,” said the Rev. Alyssa Kaplan, current pastor of Trinity. The congregation was often operating at a deficit and had faced serious challenges before calling Pastor Neumark. Trinity took this leap not when it was stable or had an excess of funds but at a time of scarcity. “They knew that churches had hurt the LGBTQIA+ community, that churches were one of the reasons why these youth were on the streets,” Kaplan said. “They saw that it was incumbent on their church to be part of the healing process.”

The congregation was willing to put everything on the table to keep the program running, and in June 2006, it unanimously voted to establish Trinity Place Shelter inside the church building as a permanent program. The shelter has been open every night since then.

Trinity Lutheran is not a large building — a modest sanctuary sits atop a basement fellowship hall, two staff offices, a kitchen and two small restrooms. Shelter guests arrive in the late afternoon and help transform the fellowship hall, often in use during the day for other programming, into a shared sleeping area with cots and a central dining table. The guests, young adults ages 18 to 24, may stay at Trinity Place for up to 18 months.

Having a safe, reliable place to sleep, cook, unwind and store belongings is critical. It helps residents maintain employment, pursue education, engage in needed services and take necessary steps toward more permanent housing. The shelter accommodates 10 guests — the maximum the space allows — creating a sense of community.

Like the building, Trinity Place’s organizational infrastructure is small but mighty. In 2006, its board was composed entirely of congregation members, and staff served as volunteers. Grant funding was available but only for proven programs. Trinity used the seed funding to build a program structure, and for two years, Wogaman served as director without drawing a salary. Slowly but surely, Trinity Place secured grant funding, hired staff and transitioned from a short-term crisis shelter to a longer-term model.

Today the church still supports the program with funding (including grants from ELCA World Hunger) and volunteers. The pastor is still executive director, but the shelter is now independent and self-sustaining, paying the church for use of the space and splitting many occupancy costs with the congregation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shelter accessed capital funding to renovate the church’s fellowship hall, making it more welcoming and functional. This year, the church and shelter plan to embark on a collaborative capital campaign, leveraging public and private funding to restore and upgrade the facilities. Their big goal is to achieve total accessibility for the property.



A resident of Trinity Place holds up a collage affirming their identity and value. Residents participate in programming that helps them become confident and capable for independent living in New York. Photo: Trinity Place Shelter

Trinity Place was born from a congregation that proclaims, “a wild belief that with God and one another we can make a difference.” For hundreds of LGBTQIA+ youth, they have. The church building has become more than a house of worship; it is a place of shelter, healing, safety and love. The bold step that Trinity took 20 years ago has strengthened not only the congregation’s mission in Manhattan but its physical presence — though these may, in fact, be one and the same.

Reflect on the following questions:

- 1 What parts of the story resonated with you? Why?
- 2 Where do you hear the Spirit moving in the story? Where was God at work?
- 3 What memories or stories of your church does this remind you of?

Biblical Foundations of Stewardship and Transformation

Leader: In this lesson, we will explore the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding and grounds our actions in faith.

Faith Without Works Is Dead (James 2:14-26)

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is worthless? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and by works faith was brought to completion. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

In small groups, after silent reflection time, read and discuss the following:

We believe that Jesus is God incarnate, the Living Word, the embodiment of God’s love. Jesus is flesh and bone, God that you can touch, see, hear, smell and taste. Jesus’ ministry on earth was visceral. The miracles he performed were not parlor tricks meant to inspire awe; they were primarily acts of healing, of feeding, of restoration. When people encountered Jesus, the material conditions of their everyday lives changed. They stopped hemorrhaging, they could see again, they could think clearly, they awoke from death. Some were restored to their larger communities, lifted out of the poverty caused by their affliction or the social taboos surrounding their circumstances.

This passage in James preaches itself, articulating what it means to follow the incarnate Jesus. Our faith is embodied; it does something; it has a real impact on the people we encounter. If our faith has no positive, felt effect on another person, then it is literally immaterial. Our land and buildings are important to our incarnational faith because they represent physical, material opportunities for ministry — they are the greatest asset we have besides our people. A church is a sacred place, and James challenges us to think about all the different things that make it sacred. More than being a house of worship on a plot of real estate, what do our land and buildings do? How do they facilitate the gospel so that the people coming through the doors feel a material change in their lives?

Consider two or three of the discussion questions below:

Beyond worship service, what activities and experiences make our church building sacred?

Read our church’s mission statement. How would it feel to experience the fulfillment of that mission in your body? Think about your five senses — what would you taste, feel, smell, see and hear?

Trinity Lutheran saw a material need that it could meet by using its property differently. What material needs does our church meet through use of our land and buildings?

What sort of experience would you hope a visitor to have in our church? What would you want them to taste, feel, smell, see and hear? How might they experience that outside of worship or Bible study?

Reconvene as a large group to reflect. What insights did you gain from the conversations? What are you walking away with?

Sending and Next Steps

Leader: In this lesson, we explored the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Let us carry these insights with us as we guide our congregation, fostering faithful stewardship and openness to God’s renewing work in our community. Let us pray...

Loving Creator, you have blessed us with bone and blood and breath. You have blessed us with bricks and mortar and soil. Help us to see these blessings with new eyes so that we might imagine a bright and vibrant future in this small corner of the earth. Open our imaginations to all the ways we can use what we have been given to live out your grace, love and justice. Thank you for inviting us to create and dream with you, for trusting us as partners in your work. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Gratitude for our Learning and Time Together

Leader: Thank you for making time to explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation. As you move forward, carry these tools and insights with you, empowering our community to act boldly, adapt to new opportunities and faithfully steward our church’s resources for the future.

To continue your learning in the context of our space, complete the optional activity "More Than Bricks and Mortar."

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Session 4: What Is God Dreaming for This Place?

Grounding Our Journey in Prayer

Leader: Welcome to this foundational lesson on faithful stewardship. Together we will explore how Scripture shapes our understanding of stewardship and transformation, equipping us to lead reflective, collaborative discussions in our congregation. As we begin, know that your openness and leadership are vital to nurturing new possibilities for our church and community.

Welcome and Opening Prayer (5 – 10 minutes)

Leader: Over the past few weeks, we have explored new ways to think about our land and buildings. How we can use them for our mission and for God's vision. How we can be good soil for the seeds God is planting in this season of our church. How God calls us to use and offer our resources rather than hoard them. How we might embody the gospel in this physical space. Today we will listen for how the Holy Spirit is moving through us and our property. God is doing a new thing in our corner of the world. How are we being invited to participate? Let us pray...

Unknowable, inconceivable, mysterious God, you are always at work. You call us to follow even when we do not know the destination. You call us to dream even when we think we have seen it all. You call us to try even when success seems impossible. We give thanks for your faithfulness for we can be a fickle people. Help us to take leaps of imagination and faith in our stewardship of this land and these buildings, knowing that you call us always toward transformation. We give thanks for all the people who have called this land home and stewarded it in honor of our shared Creator. May we also be good and faithful stewards. May our thoughts and words be honest and insightful. We give thanks for each other as siblings in Christ, help us to strengthen each other in all that we say and do. Amen.

Listening to Our Property

Leader: Each participant should have a copy of the “Mission: Rediscovery” worksheet. Groups will move through the facilities and grounds and spend four to five minutes in each space, visiting three or four spaces total.

Discussion

Discuss the following questions:

- 1 What memories came up for you?
- 2 Which space do you think is the most underutilized?
- 3 What spaces are you most excited to see new uses for?
- 4 What is the most exciting idea you had?

Biblical Foundations of Stewardship and Transformation

Leader: Throughout this bible study, we have explored the biblical foundations of stewardship and transformation, the importance of prayer and reflection, and the vital roles you play as a congregational leader. Staying in the large group, we will read the following Scripture together.

An Invitation to Abundant Life (Isaiah 55:1-13)

Hear, everyone who thirsts;
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
and your earnings for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Now you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle,
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

As a large group, reflect on the following questions together:

- Which line or verse of this Scripture affected you emotionally? Why?
- What are you hearing in the Scripture that relates to how we've been thinking about property stewardship?
- If we took these promises and invitations of God seriously, what would that mean for how we use our property?
- How has participating in this Bible study changed how you think about our buildings and land?

Sending and Next Steps (5 minutes)

Leader: As a group, think about next steps our church might take in stewarding our property. What next step does each person feel called to take? Review the following ideas for next steps and, as a group, pick one to take on. Make sure you have volunteers to lead this effort and a date for their next meeting!

1. Complete part 3 of the "Mission: Rediscovery" worksheet and schedule one-on-one conversations with stakeholders and other groups.
2. Schedule a tour of the property for congregation members so everyone has the chance to rediscover the assets our church has to offer. (Refer to "Campus Tours," available for free download at the Church Property Resource Hub website.)
3. Plan a property conversation and tour with neighbors and community stakeholders. (Refer to "Community/Building Conversations," available for free download at the Church Property Resource Hub website.)
4. Organize a church cleanup effort to consolidate storage, and donate or remove unused supplies, furniture and other clutter.

Close in prayer, using your own words or the following:

Gracious, merciful, everlasting God, you have called us to journey with you. We are but one small gathering of one generation of your church, yet you still have dreams for us. Give us the grace to honor our past, the courage to move into the future and the wisdom to guide our steps. Help us to see this place not as a relic but as an opportunity for mission. Thank you for your steadfast vision and companionship on this journey. With you, new things are always possible. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

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APPENDIX: Alternate Story and Discussion Questions

Inspiring Story of Property Transformation

Leader: Real-world stories of transformation can spark our imaginations and offer practical guidance for our own congregation. Through others' experiences, we can discover new possibilities, approaches and visions for property use. As you engage with the following story, look for both inspiration and practical lessons that we can adapt to our unique context.



The flourishing community garden at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Roseville, Minn., serves as a gathering place and provides an abundance of produce for the community and flowers to add beauty and joy to shared spaces.

Photo: Church Property Resource Hub

An Extension of Home: Prince of Peace in Roseville, Minn., Provides Community as Well as Housing

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minn., is no ordinary church campus. Beyond the sanctuary and classrooms, nestled in green space that was once considered “unused,” stand tiny homes — warm, welcoming dwellings that are part of a growing vision called the Sacred Settlement.

What makes this settlement remarkable is not just the presence of homes but also the spirit of community. “This isn’t just housing,” says Alyssa Herrig, the church’s minister of family fun, faith formation and community engagement. “This is home — and our congregation is part of it.”

The story began long before the first tiny home was built on this land. In the 1950s, Prince of Peace acquired farmland, some of which it gave away for the construction of city parks and roads. By the late 1990s, the congregation had purchased additional acreage, betting on growth that never materialized. For years, that land sat dormant, occasionally used for outdoor worship or childcare. In 2019, as members studied homelessness in their district, they were confronted with a sobering reality: more than 300 children in their local schools were unstably housed. When a longtime member left a bequest of \$750,000, the church formed a committee to discern how its land and resources might truly serve its neighbors. Conversations deepened. Ideas for shelters and affordable housing were sketched, debated and prayed over.

Even before plans solidified, the church’s parking lot had already become a refuge for folks experiencing housing instability. Valerie, who lived in a converted bus, was referred by the local police department’s social worker to Prince of Peace, where she could park her bus safely. She became part of the church community, attending worship sometimes but more often building relationships through conversation and companionship. When the nonprofit Settled learned about Valerie and her need for an insulated home during the winter, it offered her a tiny home to replace her bus. “We didn’t have a master plan,” recalled Mike Stetzler, then president of the church council. “We were just trying to care for Valerie, one day at a time.” That single act of hospitality — trading a bus for a tiny home — planted the seeds of the Sacred Settlement.

Sacred Settlements are communal housing arrangements in which churches offer permanent, supportive housing through placing Tiny Homes on excess land. Each resident enters into a covenant with the congregation to cultivate a community through shared meals, work and property management. As part of the model, Prince of Peace invited another neighbor in need of housing to live on its land, and a family belonging to the congregation committed to living in a tiny house to accompany the other residents. For the residents, the tiny homes offer stability, dignity and safety. But the real gift, as Office Administrator Kristin Bloxham describes, is community. The homes are intentionally not plumbed, so residents come into the church building for daily needs, preventing isolation and creating natural connections. This creates daily opportunities for connection and relationship between the Sacred Settlement residents and church members. Residents contribute to community life, from brewing coffee on Sunday mornings to cooking at monthly dinners.

“This is not a program,” Herrig emphasizes. “This is relationship. They’re not apart from us — they’re with us. And that changes all of us.” At the heart of it all is grace. Residents sign rent agreements, but these are undergirded by a deeper commitment: no one loses their home because of a mistake or a missed payment. “We’re pushing against a narrative many of our neighbors carry — that if they mess up, they’ll be cast out,” Bloxham reflected. “Here, grace holds the story together.”

The work has not been easy, and there have been many bumps along the road for both residents and the church. Trust takes time, volunteers are stretched, and not everyone in the congregation fully understands the model. But leaders such as Andrew Hannesh, who now serves on the council, see the settlement as part of the church’s call to be faithful in the world. “We’re not just sending resources out of the building,” Stetzler said. “We’re doing the ministry here — with and alongside our neighbors. That changes what it means to be church.”

Though Prince of Peace felt called to Sacred Settlement work, not all its neighbors were excited with the new ministry. A cease-and-desist letter from the city arrived in 2023, and the congregation found itself at a crossroads. Instead of retreating, they stepped forward. Members spoke at city council meetings, hosted open houses and invited neighbors to a pop-up carnival where people could see and hear what was happening. Nearly all feedback was positive. “Grace allowed us to be ignorant for a while,” Stetzler admitted. “But then grace helped us learn how to do this faithfully.” Through hearings, zoning challenges and long hours of discernment, the church clarified its vision: this was not a shelter, not transitional housing, but permanent homes in a lasting community.



Sacred Settlement commitments are outlined in the community room. The full community approach includes five key elements: intentional neighbors, permanent homes, cultivated places, purposeful work and supportive friends. Photo: Church Property Resource Hub

On any given day at Prince of Peace, you might find a resident tending the church garden, a candle-making workshop filling the hall with fragrance or neighbors gathered for a dinner where laughter is as present as the food. The settlement has reshaped assumptions within the congregation. One resident is pursuing a second bachelor's degree. Another found employment while still contributing meals and hospitality at church events. Their gifts are not only welcomed but celebrated. "People used to worry, 'What if something gets stolen?'" Bloxham said. "But now our building is safer because people are here around the clock. More than that, it's alive with community." At Prince of Peace, housing has become more than shelter. It has become an extension of home — for everyone.

Reflect on the following questions:

- 1 Beyond worship, what activities and experiences make our church building sacred?
- 2 Read our church's mission statement. How would it feel to experience the fulfillment of that mission in your body? Think about your five senses — what would you taste, feel, smell, see and hear?
- 3 Prince of Peace saw a material need that it could meet by using its property differently. What material needs does our church meet through its land and buildings?
- 4 What sort of experience do you hope a visitor has in our church? Think about your five senses and what would you want visitors to taste, feel, smell, see and hear. How might they experience that outside worship or Bible study?



Community rooms at Prince of Peace are homey, welcoming, and great spaces for kids and adults to spend time together. Photo: Church Property Resource Hub



Candle making and other workshops are a space for neighbors to learn new skills to earn an income. Prince of Peace offers opportunities for residents to earn rent credits for meaningful work. Photo: Church Property Resource Hub