

Reading Acts 1.1-9

What message might our church building hold for us?

Jesus' disciples were looking up as he disappeared from their sight. Jesus placed enormous trust in his disciples, leaving them to continue the work he had begun, birthing the church, birthing us, if you like, and millions of others throughout the world. Church takes many different forms and in this country usually involves a building of some sort. Our church buildings can tell us a great deal about what was important to those who built them. So, on the evening of our AGM I'm inviting us to read our own church building, to read what it says about what might be important for us as those followers of Jesus today.

So, as we sit here, I'd like us to look around and notice what we see. First of all, I'd like us to look up. There's a window in our roof that lets the light in. We have to look up to see it. Now look round our worship space. When the lights are not on it's quite shadowy with not a great deal of natural light. The dim light and the drawing of our eyes upwards hints at God's otherness, God's awesomeness. Today it might even remind us of Christ's ascension, of his being enthroned in heavenly splendour as one of our hymns puts it. Now take a look at the people around you. Our furniture is arranged so that it's possible to see people's faces, not just the backs of their heads. That's even more the case when we gather in a circle for communion. The circular approach to seating can convey our connectedness with each other as Christ's body on earth; the church as community.

Now look round and notice what you can see outside the building. More difficult eh? We can see through to the school. If you are in one of the church offices or the café you can see people passing by on the walkway outside. A church has an outward focus – 'You are to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth', Jesus says (v8). The main architectural focus here is our school, so we know that must be part of our outward focus. The windows in our offices and the café, however, draw our attention to those living on our doorstep as they pass by. In responding to them our building offers a hospitable space for different activities, including the daily café. By relocating the original St John's building from Watlington St to the heart of a new housing estate and joining it with St Stephen's which was close by, the church made a powerful statement about wanting to be a neighbourhood church. The low profile architecture, with the same colour bricks as the new housing, no prominent ecclesiastical features – all convey the message, 'We want to be with you, to serve you, to identify with you, not standing apart from you.' The church as salt and light, rather than like a light set on a hill.

So, our church has an upward focus on Christ, risen, ascended, glorified; awesome, worthy of all honour and praise. We express that through worship. We have a together focus as we care for one another, stand together with one another in all our diversity, love each other, building a community together as we represent Christ's body on earth. We have an outward focus. And our church building would suggest that the school and neighbourhood is central to that focus. You could say that our outward focus is a series of circles – the first circle being our building itself, offering worship, a hospitable space and modelling how to adapt to the climate crisis; the next circle is the school and Newtown neighbourhood, then the outer edges of the parish, notably at present Huntley Wharf, and finally the most outer circle, our global commitments to CMS, Christian Aid etc.

So, as we gather for our AGM I invite you to look up, and around, and out again, and then sit quietly, considering what message our building might have for you and /or for us at this time.

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