

Aspen

MAKING SPACE FOR INSPIRATION

An EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
of the report produced in
collaboration with Barna Group



Aspen

FOR PEOPLE TO
TRANSFORMATIVELY
EXPERIENCE WHO GOD
IS AND WHO HE
CREATED THEM TO BE

Across the nation, pastors and leaders are making their best attempts to disciple congregations and invite the community to connect with the church. In a post-Christian world where Jesus is considered one among many great spiritual teachers, the church's challenge is to demonstrate how she is different from all the other options. Aspen Group is trying to make the case that our buildings play a strategic role in that challenge.

Even among the faithful, one in four Christians finds it difficult to motivate themselves or their families to show up to church on any given Sunday. Out of the four generations studied in this report, Gen Z is most likely to feel distracted during church services and is most likely to feel unmotivated.

We all have an innate longing to be met by God, to be a part of a community in which we feel safe and seen, and to feel like we have a place that feels like home even when we feel at odds with the world. Aspen Group is making the case that the design of ministry spaces is an overlooked critical piece in for churches to shape discipleship, including responding to people's emotional and spiritual needs.

In partnership with Aspen, Barna Group conducted a study to understand the perceptions and perspectives on the importance of Church space and what that means for the future. The report Making Space for Inspiration offers an in-depth analysis of what different groups think about the importance of physical space and its impact on spiritual formation.

This executive summary distills the full Aspen and Barna report for a simple but incisive overview of the study.

INTRODUCTION: Designing with The Intention of Inspiration, Transcendence, and Safety

In the past, the grandeur of a church building has set it apart from its local community in a meaningful, recognizable, and invitational way, signifying a place of welcome, safety, community, and spiritual formation. As the spiritual climate of the western world changes and the number of church-going Christians declines, we need to create space not just for gathering, but for formation.

For humans—created with integrated bodies and souls—the built environment has the power to form our desires, whether those desires nudge us towards or pull us away from Christ. Can church design help nudge people to love God and neighbor more? What kind of space inspires people to a closer relationship with God, standing in contrast to the mundane, consumerist, and flashy which inundate and bog us down in an anxious world?

Churches have the opportunity to cultivate transcendence (historically considered as “the good, the true, and the beautiful” which point us to God) not only in words, worship, and prayer, but within the physical spaces we inhabit. Our recognition of God and our understanding of how he works can be illuminated (or not) by the atmosphere of a building, in sounds and smells, and in light and color. These types of physical spaces serve as a conduit for us to experience goodness, truth, and beauty, being met by God in a tangible way.

For this study:

- Information was drawn from both Barna Group and Aspen Group's ongoing research and projects commissions where the key question was “How can we create transformational space that leads to inspiration?”
- “Inspiration” invites people into physical spaces that cultivate a meaningful connection to enhance and grow in their relationships towards Christ and one another.

- Barna’s research was conducted by interviewing church-going Christians and non-practicing Christians. The goal for these two groups was to find out where transcendence is most likely to be experienced.

The reactions reported in the research indicated that the design of a space has a powerful influence on how we connect with others.

CHAPTER 1: What’s In A Space?

Throughout this summary and in the Making Space journal, you will come to understand what it means to be connected to the spaces that we inhabit. Specifically, we will talk about this concept as it pertains to those who come to church, seek meaningful space, and want to experience God’s transcendence and awe. To be connected to our church spaces means that we experience transcendence, closeness with the Creator, and inspiration that aids in our congregants’ spiritual formation.

The design of a space has a powerful influence on how we connect with others. The spaces we have availability to The architecture shapes the way people move through the building, lighting and colors direct our attention and emotions, making us feel energized or calm. The availability of seating, clear direction for how to get where we want to go, separation from the crowd, and our perception of privacy or exposure inadvertently shape our ability to meaningfully engage with others, but also with our own thoughts and emotions.

Understanding the connection between space and formation gives pastors the ability to create an atmosphere that shapes the faith journey of their congregation. Ultimately, where we find ourselves in the church matters. The lobby where congregants are welcomed, the sanctuary where they worship, how the lights hit the platform, and where each group of people is disciplined all matter to the success of discipleship and formation.

Not only can the beauty of a church reflect the beauty of God’s kingdom, but it can also provide a safe, welcoming place where our congregations search for transcendence, peace, safety, and meaningful connection. Different generations or congregations may have different priorities for their church space depending on their theology and mission, however, churchgoers and non- churchgoers agree that the beauty of physical space matters for experiencing transcendence.

In Search of Transcendence

Most people, if not all of us, long for more at some point in time. We look at our everyday lives and think to ourselves “what else is out there.” The hurried world that we live in does not often give us the opportunity to pause and reflect on what the ancients called the transcendentals—the truth, goodness, and beauty that God infused into creation to show us who he is.

Out of the church-going and non-church-going demographic, only 31% of U.S adults say that they enter a transcendent space on a regular basis. What does this mean for our churches? Well, one way is by intentionally creating spaces that invite and inspire people into the beauty of Christianity.

Barna’s research concludes that “A transcendent environment doesn’t need to be grand, exotic or overtly spiritual, our survey respondents suggest.” Then what does it mean to have a transcendent space? Most adults, both Christians and Non-Christians, associate a sense of peace and calm with transcendent

religious spaces. This could be anything from a prayer chapel to a garden, using light, art, sound, a reduction in stimulation, and other elements of a space to invite people to slow down and be quiet.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SPACE AND FORMATION GIVES PASTORS THE ABILITY TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE THAT SHAPES THE FAITH JOURNEY OF THEIR CONGREGATION.

The Pull of Nature & Time

Another attribute that makes a space transcendent is the need for a “sense of connectedness to nature.” Nearly 25% of both church goers and non-church goers agree that the beauty of nature helps them feel a sense of transcendence. The calming presence of nature and its beauty helps people shift from a place of hurry to a place of peace and stillness.

Making Space research shows that nearly 70% of U.S adults use the word transcendent to describe their experiences in nature. Christian churches come in as a close second on this list. In fact, 62% of people say that they experience a sense of transcendence in church buildings.

As humans have preserved historical buildings, monuments, and museums, many people in the Christian and Non-Christian camps tend to be drawn to spaces that remind us of our place time and history. To the church leader, this indicates that believers and non-believers recognize the significance of experiencing one’s finitude. Nature and history force us to experience our creatureliness. If we are willing to reflect on that, it can also invite us into a sense of belonging and connection to our Creator.

Connecting Creation and Creator

People may be more likely to hear and respond to the gospel when there are few mental distractions. However, the Black Box Theatre of the last few decades does not put people into a state of mental calm like natural elements daylight, windows to the outdoors, and natural materials (what is often known as biophilic design). The sense of calm that these things bring to a space opens us up to emotions and thoughts where goodness, truth and beauty, and transcendence can sow their seeds.

Key Questions to Consider:

- How do you think about transcendence, beauty, and the creative nature of God in relation to your church? If someone off the street walked through your building, what impression of God would they get from your space?
- How might proximity or access to your church be preventing people from visiting regularly? In what ways can your church better connect with the surrounding community to help close this gap?
- What calming traits does your space embody? Why is it important to the church to be seen as a place of peace?

- How can a person's connection to nature also connect them with God? What can you do to draw nature into (or around) your church? How can church design point to God as a creator?

CHAPTER 2: No Place Like Home

What does the word 'home' mean to you? Brian J. Walsh and Steven Bouma-Predijer, authors of *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, establish a difference between the meanings of house and home. A house is simply a place of residence, but home is a place of dwelling, or living. Home has a deeper meaning for Christians as we find our home in God. Home becomes a place that is deeply engrained in our spiritual life.

Where Would You Go?

When pastors think about the design and feel of a church, consider how people might experience the building as a spiritual home. To most, a spiritual home is both secure and eternal. Understanding home as where a person goes to live, rest, eat, love, and be loved by others is much different through the Christian worldview.

One of the questions that the Barna/Aspen study asked is where people are most likely to have deep, meaningful conversations. A majority of practicing Christians, nearly three fourths, and just over half of nonpracticing Christians say that they're comfortable talking about spiritual faith in a Christian church.

Discipleship relationships are foundational to one's faith journey. We need them for spiritual growth and maturity, to be challenged and held accountable in our walk with Christ. Two thirds of practicing Christians would be much more likely to have a conversation about discipleship in a church rather than someone else's home, in a car, at the park, online, or at a public place like a coffee shop.

In today's age, largely heightened due to the Covid-19 pandemic, rates of loneliness are surging at unprecedented rates. Behavioral scientist Susan Mettes says, "Loneliness is a thirst that drives us to seek companionship. Without fellowship, we go on needing others and seeking relief for that need." If loneliness is becoming an epidemic in the United States, then where are people going to talk about these feelings?

According to Barna research, one third of U.S adults (33%) are most comfortable talking about loneliness in someone else's home. Out of this survey pool, only 36% of practicing Christians feel "a Christian church" is where they would feel most comfortable talking about feelings of loneliness.

Church online has become an increasing trend over the last several years. With that being said, Barna's research has continued to show that people have an innate desire to be with one another in person. Especially when talking about topics of faith, loneliness, and emotions. This is good news for pastors as there is an increasing likelihood that they will be able to reach more people in person.

When people walk through the dark night of the soul and need to process their depression and anxiety, 34% of U.S adults are more willing to have conversations in someone's home. Practicing Christians are more likely to visit a church when they want to have meaningful conversations about their emotions as opposed to nonpracticing Christians, self-identifying Christians, and those who are not Christians. Both groups, Christians, and non-Christians, come to the agreement that they would rather talk about depression and anxiety in their homes.

A Need to Make Space

Why do all these numbers matter when it comes to making space for inspiration in your church? These reports indicate that proximity and access can be determining factors for where people will go when they are feeling down or overwhelmed. Many people don't see church buildings as a welcoming place for people to "not be okay."

Perhaps this is because many churches tend to be more "upbeat" than peaceful, with more loud spaces than reflective ones, and more priority on large groups moving from the parking lot to the worship center than on having places for more private or personal conversations.

But churches need space that is personal. A church building is an invitation to encounter the goodness that God offers. For many, the church doesn't feel like a home. Yet millions of people pursue the satisfaction of a spiritual need for home when they enter the church building to intimately connect with a transcendent God..

Key Questions to Consider:

- U.S. adults tend to view the church as a place to discuss spiritual matters rather than personal or emotional topics. What might this say about how people view the purpose of the church?
- Does your church's experience, from the parking lot to the sanctuary, help visitors enter into calm and relationship?
- Knowing what to expect often contributes to psychological safety; can visitors to your building clearly see where to go, where the restrooms are, and how they can participate?
- In what ways does your church space cultivate relational connection? What about spiritual connection? Is there a good balance of social vs. spiritual elements in your church design? What could you improve?

EVEN IN A SECULARIZED SOCIETY, BOTH PRACTICING AND NONPRACTICING CHRISTIANS SEE THE CHURCH AS A SACRED PLACE.

CHAPTER 3: Faith and Feelings

Old Testament scholar Matthew Richard writes "Even in our broken bodies, there will be times when reality of our faith profoundly touches us." This report has touched on the research that people associate the concepts of sacredness and transcendence with nature. Many U.S adults, even Christians, find that the Church doesn't intentionally cultivate a space of transcendence or inspiration.

The View from the Pew

Yet, even in a secularized society, both practicing Christians and nonpracticing Christians see the church as a sacred place! (77%) Among Christians and non-Christians, people feel a variety of emotions when they enter a church building. For the most part, both groups report favorable emotions like connection to God, safety, and belonging.

Non-Christians tend to report more negative emotions in a church space, however this group still reports positive emotions when they talk about how they feel in church. Three in five U.S. adults view the church as “a sacred space” rather than “just a building.”

Different generations report different feelings when sitting in a Christian church. Notably, Gen Z are more likely to highlight the negative emotions that they would feel in a church, such as anxiousness (21%), uncertainty (17%), and boredom (18%). On the contrary, Gen Z is still more likely to report feeling included (21% vs. 15%) or connected to God (38% vs. 29%) than Millennials.

U.S. Christians also feel limited in their connection with their church’s building. Only 37% of Christians find their church building beautiful. The survey also indicates declining numbers of people who feel a designated church building is necessary.

Key Questions to Consider:

How would you rate your church’s intentionality in considering how someone might feel in your physical spaces? How can you encourage emotions that seem to be felt less often in church environments, like feeling included, valued, or in awe?

Many Christians don’t view their church as beautiful. What might be causing this in today’s culture? How have you been intentional about beauty when making decisions about the design of your church spaces? What have you ignored?

Think about how you communicate with members both in the church building on Sundays and during the week. Are friendliness and hospitality prominent? Do spaces, physical and virtual, attract or deter? In what ways could you inspire people to regularly join in community and worship?

CONCLUSION: 4 Reminders for Leaders

God’s design of the Garden shows his attention to detail in the creation of the world. God created trees and dirt, boundaries and openness, yet chaos did not reign and there were instructions for how Adam and Eve were to care for the garden. God’s presence reigned in all aspects in that space and it was beautiful. What if our churches reflected more of this today?

Our bodies need buildings. People have innate connection with the natural world and the built environment. Knowing this, is your church a place someone would want to visit if they knew nothing else about who you are? How does your church space encourage the sacred practices of prayer and worship?

Buildings tell stories! With people feeling less and less connected to their church building, ask yourself what story your church building tells. Is it one of invitation and welcoming? Or is it a story of busyness, noise, and distraction?

Stories inspire people to take action. Even in our church buildings, stories of inspiration can lead to community and discipleship. As you reflect on the inspiration your building offers, think about what spaces you might change to encourage rest, lingering, community, and hospitality.

Inspiration points to God. Ultimately, a church that does not point to God doesn’t align with what people seek from this sacred building. In point someone to the life of Christ and the beauty, goodness, and truth

of God! The physical spaces in which we live our lives shape our desires, our character, and our priorities.

As you unpack some of the findings in this journal, begin to consider, What does your church communicate to the world? Is this a place of inspiration? These reflections will help provide the inspiration necessary for your congregation and its members to think deeply about experiencing God. To find out more about Making Space for Inspiration, purchase a copy by following this link!