
Demolish or reconvert? Debate on the use of empty churches

Churches in Germany are losing members. Increasingly numerous abjurations are recorded each year, especially in Catholic and Protestant contexts, resulting in fewer faithful and less revenue, which means fewer Masses, Celebrations of the Word, prayer vigils, choir rehearsals, festive congregational gatherings. This ultimately leads to the practical problem of deciding what should be done with empty churches. According to Art Historian **Stefanie Lieb**, numerous Catholic and Protestant church buildings will be sold and repurposed in the coming years: "It is projected that approximately 30 per cent of church buildings will be redundant churches in the coming years." Lieb is director of Studies at the Catholic Academy in Schwerte and a member of the working team of a project dedicated to "Transformation of sacred heritage in Germany", promoted by the Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation). At present, only a limited number of church buildings have been reconverted, Lieb told *katholisch.de*. Some 500 of the country's 24,000 Catholic churches have been abandoned since 2000, 100 of which have been converted. What is their future destination? The ongoing debate in Germany - in the light of a rapidly changing situation all over Europe - may definitely pave the way for a general reflection on the changes in the believers' interaction with places of worship. "The biggest problem is their non-use," points out **Jan Ermel** of the Denkmalakademie der Deutschen Stiftung Denkmalschutz (Academy of the German Foundation for Monument Protection). According to Ermel, despite the decline in religious sentiment throughout Germany, the emotional attachment to church buildings remains in many cases. Houses of worship are the oldest and sometimes the only monuments in many locations, and therefore demolition is generally discouraged, not just for emotional reasons or to protect the monuments, but also to spare the effort of clearing out the material and for eventual new construction. Hence, conversion of the existing premises is preferable, provided its structural condition is maintained. For Ermel, there are a variety of possibilities, but they must take into account many aspects characterising the different situations: adaptive reuse projects that are closely aligned to the original purpose of the site are highly recommended. A place of worship could be converted into a cultural centre, museum, concert hall, theatre or library. We can find many examples of sensible reuse of redundant houses of worship in the past. Churches in monasteries, closed down during the 18th and 19th centuries' secularisation process, were eventually converted into school and university buildings. A similar approach was applied to a number of church buildings in the former East Germany: they lost their status as houses of worship and became cultural centres. For Stefanie Lieb, even reusing the building for residential purposes should be carefully considered: a number of post-war churches in the reconstruction period, when every new neighbourhood had its modern Catholic and Protestant churches, often too big in proportion to needs of the local population, were converted into social housing or into assisted living facilities. In a number of cases, larger premises with outbuildings connected to the church were converted into multi-purpose centres, with community halls, restaurants, meeting places and even shops. Certainly, anyone re-designing a new building would have to start first of all from what it used to be, i.e. a church, and for Lieb, preserving "the atmosphere of sacredness that was in the original intentions of the builders and thereby linking it to the reconversion project" is a decisive aspect. "Churches have been rebuilt throughout the history of Christianity", says theologian **Petra Bahr**, Lutheran regional bishop of Hanover, adding that places of worship are not an end in themselves. In fact, in any event, the Christian community could in theory meet in the living room or in a basement "as it was forced to do quite often in the course of its history." In 2019, Hanover saw the evangelical church Gerhard Uhlhorn Kirche become a university residence. It was first consecrated in 1963 and was abandoned due to a lack of worshippers in 2012. Today, it offers 27 single and double rooms on two floors, plus four social housing units in the lower ground floor and a community kitchen in the former organ room to students of the university in Hanover. Today the church is one of the most unique university residences in Germany and the first of its kind in the world. One of the most frequently asked questions in these situations is whether church buildings of little historical and

architectural value should be converted into supermarkets or fast-food restaurants, or sports venues. The general tendency, also in light of the fact that between 80% and 90% of church buildings in Germany are protected by federal laws or individual Lander is that, as far as possible, a church should remain a public space even with its new destination: churches have always been places for retreat and sanctuary and even today, even in many contemporary realities, they create a very strong feeling of community and territorial identification. "We should return to viewing churches as a social space, just as they were in earlier times," Stefanie Lieb concluded.

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