

FAQ – Bethel Lutheran Church site transition

How can you sell the church?

To clarify: “the church” is the gathering of people in Christ’s name – it is not the building. The building is a vessel for the church to use in its ministry, but it is not the church proper.

Ok, fine: how can you sell the building in which the church gathers?

Honestly, in this case, how could we not? Bethel’s financial picture has been unhealthy for years, running annual deficits of \$20,000-\$40,000 for over a decade. Annual operational expenses for the old site average \$70,000 or so – to say nothing of the tens of thousands of dollars in repairs which had built up over time. With numbers like that, something radical needed to happen.

Was it really that bad?

Financially? Yes, it really was. And while finances aren’t the most important part of ministry – not by far – they certainly play an important role in determining what you can actually accomplish. Check out [this link](#) for more details

How did you go about making this decision?

With a lot of faith. And prayer. And more faith. A detailed version about our process [can be found here](#), but the short version is that we worked together as a community to engage in open and honest conversation about our hopes, fears, and desires for the future ministry of Bethel Lutheran Church. Once it was all said and done, the decision to sell and relocate was unanimous.

It seems like this was a really fast process...

Maybe if you haven’t been a part of it. Some of that process is spelled out in more detail in the [links above](#), but inklings of a need for change can be found all the way back in a 2002 report created following Pastor Jim Schoeld’s retirement: “Study Phase of the Interim at Bethel Lutheran”. In that report, concern was brought up surrounding Bethel’s “detachment” from the surrounding community, its financial struggles, and how these factors were likely to play out in the future of the congregation.

Who did you sell the site to?

After looking all various options over the past year, and experiencing several setbacks along the way, we ultimately accepted an offer from the Buddha Jewel Monastery of Seattle. Their willingness to preserve and renovate the building while keeping it as a place for spiritual discernment – albeit not a Christian one – was seen as the healthiest of our available options, both for our ministry and for the building itself.

Wait – you sold it to a group of Buddhists?

Yes. And our [new North City location](#) is a former Hindu temple – ironic, eh?

What attracted you to the North City location?

Early on we realized that we had several options once we sold the former site: we could rent a space, build a space, or buy a space. After considering the ramifications of each of these – and taking into consideration our relationships with our onsite ministry partners – we determined that our strongest

shot at building a healthy new form of ministry lay in purchasing a site which would accommodate our partners as well as ourselves. When the North City location was discovered, it quickly became apparent that the site's unique layout and prime location would be a true blessing to the future of Bethel.

Back to the Buddhists: what will happen to the crosses?

We have agreed to work with them to find organizations interested in taking possession of these items as they become available during the upcoming remodel of the site. With rare exception, they are too large for our new location.

What about the stained glass wall?

As it happens, the stained glass wall will be staying: the monastery will be removing the exterior paint which was added to highlight a cross shape within it, but it will otherwise remain intact. In the extremely unlikely event that they ever decide to remove the wall in its entirety, they have been put in contact with the Grunewald Guild (the artist community responsible for its design and installation) to determine how to handle dismantling and preserving it.

And the chapel windows?

The family of the man who made these windows has been in contact with us, and their contact information has been given to the monastery. If the decision is made to remove the windows, they will return to his family.

And the etched window in the narthex?

Similar to the crosses, in the event this window is removed we will work with the monastery to find a new home for it. At one point we thought it would be possible to incorporate it into the North City location, but that is looking less feasible at present.

But why didn't you just remove all that stuff before you sold the building?

When you sell a building, it is generally frowned upon to remove structural elements such as windows and walls before doing so.

Are you bringing the pews?

No. With our move to the North City location, we will be intentionally focusing on creating a space which can be shared with the greater community. Keeping space flexible and accessible is crucial to this approach, and the pews would dramatically lessen our ability to do so.

But it's not a church without pews!

Actually, pews are a relatively recent concept in the life of the worshiping body, only coming into vogue in the 14th century (and not popularized until after the Reformation). You can find [several thoughts on the history of pews](#) around the internet. These days, more and more congregations have switched from pews to chairs as a way to increase the flexibility of their space – we are far from trend-setters in this regard. But more importantly, remember: the church is the people, not the building. Just as Jesus reminded us that [“The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath,”](#) the same can be said of buildings and their accompanying furniture.

So what makes you think this move will be so beneficial for Bethel's future?

In our prior location, we were struggling to simply survive. Rather than obeying the [Great Commission](#), we were just trying to drown a little slower. The North City site has the advantage of being nearly self-sustaining: the income we receive from our ministry partners will nearly offset the operational expenses of the site itself. This means that nearly 100% of our offerings as a community of faith can be earmarked towards tangible ministry – and that makes for a much stronger foundation.

So this is all about money?

No: it's about a community of faith working together to discern how God can use them for a greater good. Like it or not, fiscal responsibility and healthy stewardship is a part of all that – but it's certainly not the entirety, nor even the most important part.

What will the North City site offer that's so great?

With this move, Bethel will be placing its ministry in the heart of Shoreline's [North City Business District](#) – a city-designated urban village. With the arrival of [Light Rail](#) in 2023 and the other changes which have been happening around town, the NCBD is poised to grow in the future: Bethel's relocation will allow us to benefit from those changes and grow a new form of ministry as a result.

You mentioned your community partners: are they coming with you on this move?

Nearly all are, yes. You can see a [full list here](#).

This is all well and good, but I just can't support any of these changes.

That is absolutely your prerogative, but recognize that resisting necessary change is the exact attitude which helped Bethel reach a point where this decision was needed in the first place.

Ouch. That hurt.

Well, if the shoe fits... But seriously, look at the bigger picture here: what was Bethel founded to do? Spread the love of God made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, right? Isn't that the core of it all? With this change, the community known as "Bethel Lutheran Church" will be better able to carry out that mission than has been possible for years – maybe even longer. No, it won't look the same as it once did – but that's because resurrection has a way of changing things. Even for the better.

I see what you did there.

It wasn't intended to be subtle.