

How churches fit into their communities is up for debate

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by [Randy Bright](#)

There is a great argument within the circles of planners and demographers about the role and future of urban and suburban areas of cities. There is also great argument about what a church is and how it should fit in within a community.

Who wins these arguments will have a profound impact on the future of individual congregations and their ability to maintain a physical presence (in the form of a building or facility) in the communities where they currently exist and where they want to be.

No one who pays attention to the news would disagree that Christians and the church as a whole are facing a challenge to their existence, but it is unclear whether or not the side of the seculars, the progressives, and atheists can force its will upon Americans and American Christians in particular. What is clear that there is still a deeply embedded Christian-Judeo ethic and mindset in America, and that even though they are the most tolerant, when push comes to shove, we see their presence.

For example, in 2012 Chick-fil-A's president Dan Cathy spoke out against gay marriage and was immediately barraged with criticism and accusations of intolerance by the gay lobby.

The result? An overwhelming show of support by the general public demonstrating their belief that Cathy was not only right, but had a right to say what he believed. People sat in long lines for hours to drive through their facilities, not for a sandwich, but to show their support.

More recently, a similar thing is happening to the patriarch of the *Duck Dynasty*, Phil Robertson, who spoke out against homosexuality. The public has shown tremendous support for the Robertson family, creating a backlash against the A&E network.

These examples demonstrate something that most planners don't want to admit, and that is that Christianity is still a very relevant part of society. Despite that knowledge, there are groups out there that want to make the rules for how churches are developed.

This is a quote by one of those planners who wrote to me, "We are opposed to the mega-church isolated in the countryside or suburbs surrounded by acres of parking. This is an environmentally

and socially unsustainable model; it paves the landscape, it forces driving, it isolates the membership from the rest of the community, and it isolates the non-driver from the church. It's profoundly anti-civic.”

Within communities all over America, this kind of mindset demonstrates the belief that communities (not the churches themselves) should have the ability to shape and form the physical presence of churches by codifying the rules by which these churches can be built.

It is a microcosm of the tactic now being employed by a few people in the federal government, whereby people will be required by law to act against conscience under the Affordable Care Act; at some point, and I believe it is now, a similar tactic will be used to diminish the presence of the church within communities by condemning certain forms of churches and allowing only limited forms of churches to be seen.

Not all communities are bending to this will, however, and I believe it is because there is (as I demonstrated with the examples of Cathy and Robertson) a strong presence of Christian-Judeo belief in our country.

I can demonstrate this with my own city here in Tulsa. Out of town consultants came here several years ago to help us rewrite our master plan, and in the process exhibited a disregard for the development of new churches. Yet since that plan has been written, I can think of at least one example of a large new church being built in what will be the center of one of the largest retail areas in the city.

For that I commend our city planners and city government for allowing.

What is unfortunate is that the arguments I described at the beginning of the article are far from over, and will likely grow more intense over the coming decades as forces from the federal government and others continue to inject their will into how this country will continue to develop its cities and infrastructure. The path that is being written for us includes the dense development of urban cores and the suburbs.

How churches maintain their presence, especially as older congregations with old facilities transition out from the old to the new, will depend upon recognition of the problem and their will to fight for that presence.

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