

How to Plan Church Facility Improvements

Church DNA Determines Church Facility Designs

A Book Review in the Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society

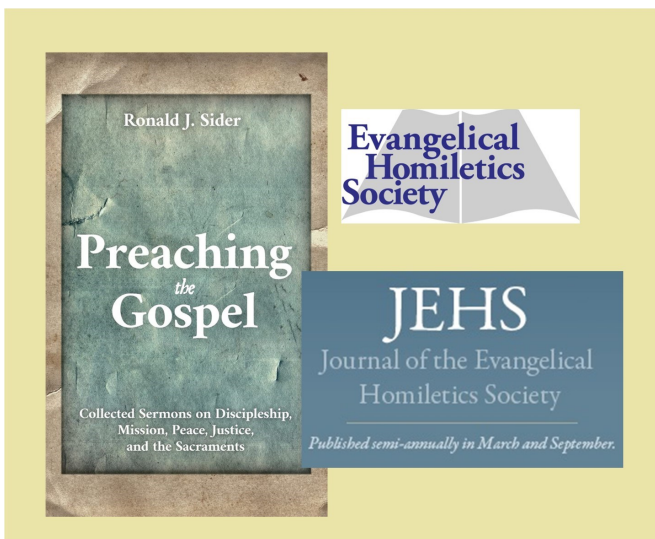
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Improving your church facility can be challenging... to say the least... Understanding your church’s DNA is critical to implementing the right improvements at the right time. This understanding is demonstrated in a sermon by Ronald Sider, who asks, “Why are we buying the new property? The simple answer to the question is this: People need Jesus and they need a job. People have both spiritual and material needs. People have bodies as well as souls. That is why people need Jesus and a job” (*Preaching the Gospel: Collected Sermons on Discipleship, Mission, Peace, Justice, and the Sacraments*, p. 80).

As a member of the Evangelical Homiletics Society, I was recently asked to provide a review of this book for publication in our journal. Chapter eight caught my attention as it shows a church’s DNA determining church facility decisions. Here’s the context for Sider’s message: “I preached this sermon at my church, Oxford Circle Mennonite Church in Philadelphia, on November 16, 2008, as our small congregation with fewer than fifty members was in the audacious process of purchasing a large \$3.5 million property so we could greatly expand our holistic community development work in the surrounding neighborhood” (p. 80).

I’m glad Sider used the word “audacious,” because this is well beyond the financial scope of what I would normally recommend for a church of that size... UNLESS, the church’s DNA clearly drove the decision (and it drove the additional financial puzzle pieces).

The following is my complete review of this book as it appears in the Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society, Spring, 2023.



Preaching the Gospel: Collected Sermons on Discipleship, Mission, Peace, Justice, and the Sacraments. By Ronald J. Sider. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021. 978-1-7252-8601-6, 142 pp., \$20.00.

Reviewer: James Rodgers, Facility Ministry, Gilberts, IL.

“Provocative title,” thought this reviewer before cracking open the book. Is the gospel about serving the earthly needs of people, namely, meeting them where they are at? Is the gospel about leading them to a faith relationship in Christ? If you believe it includes both elements, you might value Ronald Sider’s *Preaching the Gospel: Collected Sermons on Discipleship, Mission, Peace, Justice, and the Sacraments*.

Sider’s resume is impressive with extensive credentials as a pastor (Mennonite), scholar (professor emeritus at Palmer

Theological Seminary), leader, activist (social and political), evangelist, and writer (approximately 40 books). The title is explained on the back cover, "This collection of Ron Sider's sermons and speeches delivered in his lifetime of global ministry capture the essence of his theology, ethics, and mission. It moves from stirring personal occasions (his sermon at his dad's funeral) to challenging calls for racial and economic justice (his influential, prophetic speech in apartheid South Africa in 1979)." The collection of fourteen sermons is divided into four parts: one—*Following Jesus in Faithful Discipleship*, two—*Holistic Ministry, Justice, and Peace*, three—*Baptism, Ordination, and Holy Communion*, and four—*Finishing Well*.

While the book's organization is topical, in order to capture the essence of his ministry, the specific selections also paint transparent biographical strokes, inviting us into Sider's life and heart. The opening sermon was preached at the funeral of Sider's dad. While not an exposition, it was enjoyable reading. Chapter three about Uncle Jesse is not even a sermon, but rather a most memorable article from *Moody Monthly* and by itself is worth half the purchase price. The last section contains only one sermon, *Chapter 14: Living and Dying in the Resurrection*, but is an appropriate singular reflection on meaningful living. "My dad told me that the evening before my mother died, he was sitting beside her holding her hand. Suddenly my mother said, 'I think I will go and be with Jesus.' Fighting back tears, Dad told her, 'Yes, you do that.' And the next day mother died resting in the assurance that she was moving to a wonderful future in the presence of her risen Lord" (142).

While gifted in many areas, Sider will probably be best remembered as a social activist (though one of his book titles challenges the term, *I Am Not a Social Activist: Making Jesus the Agenda*). He was the founder of Evangelicals for Social Action and his book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, sold over 500,000 copies. The sermon for *Chapter 7: Words and Deeds in Apartheid South Africa*, was his plenary address to the South African Christian Leadership Assembly in Pretoria, South Africa on July 14, 1979. He delivered that message to about 5,000 South African Christians from almost all the races and denominations to challenge the issue of apartheid. While it is a topical sermon, it is certainly biblical with extensive Scripture and sows expository nuggets.

Interestingly, Sider's definition of the gospel is described in, *Chapter 8: Why Are We Buying the New Property?* The chapter reveals no details about the property or proposed building. Rather, Sider explains his dual focus in the gospel: "But if the gospel is just forgiveness of sins, then it is a one-way ticket to heaven and we can live like hell until we get there. People can accept the gospel and not change at all how they behave" (82). Additionally, "But we will never suppose that all people need is a better job. They also need Jesus. They need the risen Jesus to forgive their sins, live in their hearts, and give them the power to say no to destructive lifestyles" (86).

Sider was an outstanding story teller and God gave him engaging experiences to relate. The strong biographical tones in his messages suggest Sider viewed life through providential eyes. This is not a collection of expository sermons and in this reviewer's opinion they should not be evaluated through just a homiletical grid. That would miss Sider's point. Rather, these sermons stimulate the reader to consider the both/and of the gospel message.

On July 27, 2022 Sider moved into "a wonderful future in the presence of [his] risen Lord" (142), meaning that this book was published a scant year before his passing. It is a fitting concluding work to summarize his life through his message. Reflective readers will find provocative grist for their own lives and messages. While not a model for expository preaching, this volume provides extensive input for practical theology as a whole.