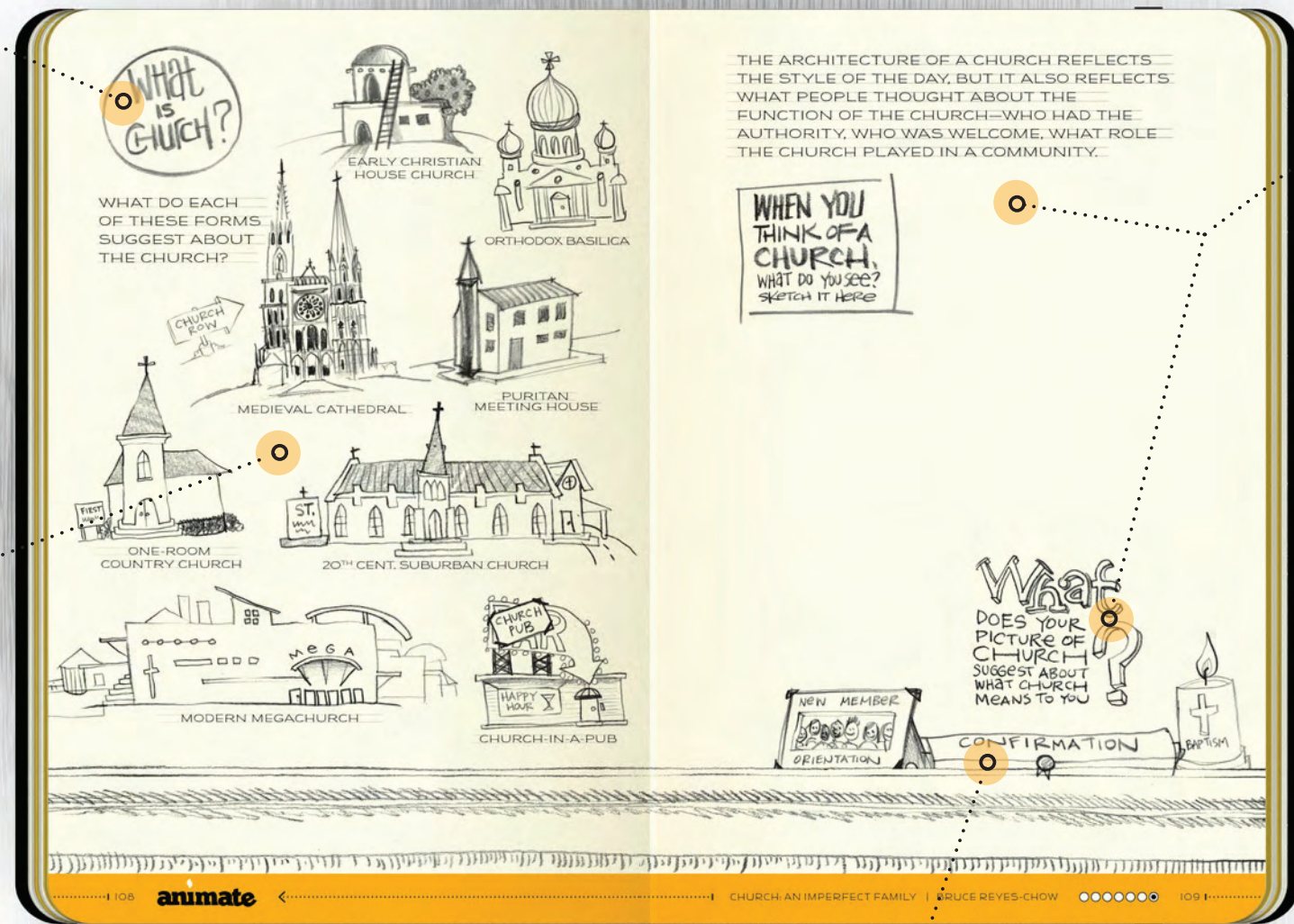


They say beauty is only skin deep. Can the same be said of the Body of Christ, the church? Ask the group which of the churches on this page they are initially attracted to and why.

- What might be the upsides of attending such a church?
- What might be the downsides?
- What value do you place on the physical structure of the church? Why?

"CHURCH" WAS DEFINITELY THE PEOPLE AND NOT A BUILDING FOR THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS. THEY MET IN EACH OTHER'S HOUSES. SO WHEN THE APOSTLE PAUL TRIES TO GIVE ONE MAIN PURPOSE FOR WORSHIP IN 1 CORINTHIANS 12-14, HE WRITES ABOUT WORKING FOR "THE COMMON GOOD" (12:7) AND "BUILDING [ONE ANOTHER] UP" (14:4, 5, 26).

The kind of church we attend and the roles we play in it strongly impact our church experience. Bruce has played a variety of roles in differing church settings, from planting a church to holding the top position in the Presbyterian Church, one of the largest mainline denominations in the United States. Now he's starting an online church, a whole new kind of Christian community. Ask your group to inventory the kinds of churches they've attended. Then have them define the roles they played or are playing in each.



JESUS HAD A NUMBER OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE SACRED SPACES. HIS CONVERSATION WITH THE WOMAN AT THE WELL GOT TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP (JOHN 4:19-26). HIS PREDICTION ABOUT THE TEMPLE CAME UP AT HIS TRIAL (MATTHEW 26:57-68), AND HE WAS EVEN CONNECTED WITH A BIT OF RENOVATION ACTIVITY (MATTHEW 27:50-54). JESUS BOTH ATTENDED PUBLIC WORSHIP (JOHN 7:10-18) AND REGULARLY TOOK PERSONAL TIME TO COMMUNE WITH GOD (LUKE 11:1).

BRUCE IDENTIFIES THE GOD-CENTERED nature of church as what distinguishes it, but there's a strong tension between the God-centered church and the benefits of church to a person, right? Turn the conversation in your group toward how they coexist.

NOTE HOW THE "MANTLE" HOLDS some church souvenirs: a confirmation certificate, baptism candle, and welcome photo. Urge the group to share some of their milestone moments in the church. But be sure to provide some explanation if the insider language goes over the head of anyone in the group who hasn't had such moments.

Pose this question to your group. Invite them to imagine the ideal church together. Include a building, groups, programs, and even a description of the kinds of people who will attend.

- What is most important architecturally?
- What is most important programmatically?
 - Where would your building be?
 - What would happen in it?
 - What would your group do outside it?
- How would you characterize this ideal church to people you meet? If you "build it," would these people come? Why?

Then encourage the group to sketch out their ideal of church on this page—either in images or words. Follow up with the second question. Call out the unique features of each design and talk about the reasons behind each design.

- How can you apply some of these ideas to your church now?

The Apostle Paul pictures church as a place where people of diverse gifts each bring what they've got—a voice of wisdom, words of knowledge, special faith, the ability to heal, miraculous powers, prophetic powers, discernment, languages, and so on (1 Corinthians 12:1-11). Have someone read out 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and 14:1-5, 26. Have the group listen for the way Paul pictures the purpose of the church meetings in Corinth. Ask people to name the purposes.

- When have you felt like you were contributing to the common good of the church?
- When have you been "built up" by a church gathering?
 - When have you felt like you've helped "build up" others?
- How might all these themes of building up be understood as "God-centered?" See Ephesians 4:11-16.

SOME LEADING THEOLOGIANS OF OUR TIME HAVE RECENTLY ASSERTED THAT ANY SELF-SERVING MOTIVE IS INCONGRUOUS WITH WORSHIP. PROFESSOR EMERITUS DAVID KELSEY IS AN EXAMPLE. HE IDENTIFIES THE CHURCH'S PRIMARY FUNCTION AS DOXOLOGY—A CELEBRATION OF GOD'S GLORY.

David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (2 Vols, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Miroslav Volf, [reference incomplete]