

# Churches adopt pandemic-era Airbnb models

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HOUSTON (RNS)—After the death of the congregation’s founding pastor a few years ago, membership at Cullen Missionary Baptist Church in Houston took a nosedive.

With less revenue coming in pledges and the expenses of keeping the church, which takes up nearly a city block, running, “we had more space than we knew what to do with and didn’t have the people or resources to pay for it,” said current pastor Andre Jones.

That’s when Cullen Missionary Baptist Church turned to Church Space, a platform akin to Airbnb that allows houses of worship to rent their sanctuaries, fellowship halls and kitchens to other congregations and organizations for as much as \$30,000 a year.

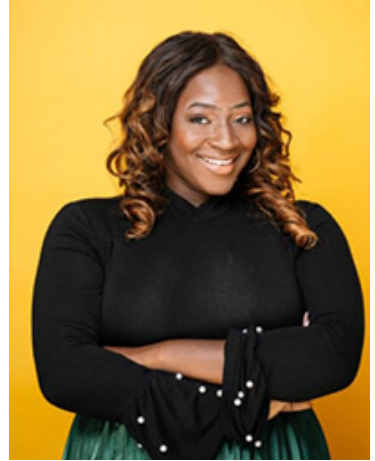
“Without Church Space, I don’t know if we would still be here,” said Jones. “Those funds and resources that came in have been lifesaving.”

## Churches seek to rent out unused space

Since COVID-19 struck in March 2020, many churches have found themselves in Cullen’s position. Faced with declining revenues and empty buildings, churches have looked for ways to make a virtue of unused space.

Some have rented out offices and classrooms for those working and learning remotely. Others have hosted “ghost kitchens” that allow restaurants without storefront locations to prepare food for delivery

services like Door Dash or Uber Eats. During the pandemic, Church Space has grown from 45 renters and churches to more than 3,700.



Church Space co-founder and CEO Day Edwards. (Courtesy photo)

“We have also unfortunately seen a 200 percent increase in funeral rentals,” said Day Edwards, co-founder of Church Space.

But for churches in the United States and the United Kingdom, offering a variety of rentals to local tourists, professional chefs or burnt-out frontline workers has done undeniable good. Sometimes offering church camping (known as “champing”) experiences to travelers has been the difference between eking by or closing altogether.

Edwards and her co-founder, Emmanuel Brown, launched Church Space in Houston in 2019. The churches who participated in Church Space’s pilot program earned an average of \$23,000 to \$38,000 in their first year, according to Edwards.

Church Space currently has about 150 host sites across the United States but tends to be concentrated across the Bible Belt. Brown, a pastor himself,

said Church Space is “for churches and by church leaders” and works to ensure that host churches are matched with renters who share their values.

“We truly believe that when churches earn more they’re able to do more, not just in their congregation but also in their community,” said Edwards.

The Church Space model allows participating churches to maintain their tax-exempt status, though the co-founders declined to share additional details. “It’s something that sets Church Space apart from the other competitors,” said Edwards.

## **UK churches rent space for spiritual respite**

In the United Kingdom, another Airbnb-like service operated from Yorkshire, England, is in the business of providing spiritual respite.

“Both Jasper and I were exhausted in parish ministry,” said Tina Hodges, who owns All Hallows, a former Anglican church, with her husband. “We both spent 20 years ordained as Anglican priests in the Church of England ... I was meeting an awful lot of people who were in need of a retreat and was recognizing the need for sacred space.

As “Eagle’s Retreat,” the former All Hallows, which sits on land where Christians have worshipped since the 6th century, features a renovated interior that highlights the building’s stained-glass windows, spiral staircase and barrel ceiling. It also includes updates like flat-screen TVs and a jacuzzi.

For additional fees, the couple offers services such as spiritual direction and marriage counseling. They also offer scholarships for those who can’t afford the stay, and according to the website, they “particularly welcome those who have been bereaved, bruised or worn down in life.”

The array of services in the sacred space seems perfectly suited to the pandemic. “I can’t even tell you how many holidays we’ve given for free this year,” said Hodges. “We’ve had a lot more people who’ve needed space or needed people to talk to ... many people who are key workers, including ministers, who have just been falling apart at the seams.”

Hodges said that taking time to enjoy Yorkshire’s remote and scenic dales or soak in the church’s ancient beauty has brought healing to many of their guests.

“There are places where we have hallowed ground,” said Hodges. “And this is one of them.”

## **‘Champing’ in historic sanctuaries**

There are others: The United Kingdom offers those who don’t mind roughing it the chance to go church hopping. An organization called the Churches Conservation Trust offers an experience called “Champing,” or church camping—overnighting in a historic sanctuary.

From April to October, champers can spend the night snuggled on camp beds in the sanctuaries of churches for a modest fee. (Dogs stay for free.)

Lest champers feel guilty snoozing under the vaulted arches of a 17th-century country church, the proceeds go toward restoring the churches and providing jobs in the communities where the churches are located.

“Quite often, the churches themselves do not have a ready source of income,” said Guy Foreman, head of enterprise at Churches Conservation Trust. “Champing is very much part of a suite of opportunities that historic churches can utilize to build income that helps support their upkeep.”

Foreman said that while participation dipped in 2020, the current season is the “best we’ve ever had.” Foreman attributed the popularity to U.K.

citizens looking for a creative staycation.



The lobby of The Russell, part of Mission Hotels in Nashville.  
(Courtesy photo)

A church-based charitable approach to vacationing is also the idea behind Mission Hotels, based in Nashville. The five-year-old company's three refurbished churches no longer host weekly worship and instead host guests in beds fashioned with church pew headboards.

Mission Hotels' model is similar to traditional Airbnbs except that most of the profits are donated to local charities.

Micah Lacher, owner of Mission Hotels, is a person of faith who sees the hotels as a way to continue the mission of the original churches.

"We are providing a refuge and home for our guests with every stay," said Lacher. "We are pouring into the community and creatively meeting needs for those who are underserved. These churches were doing just the same when they were in the spaces."

Lacher estimates Mission Hotel's donations have been used to provide more than 100,000 showers, meals and beds through their nonprofit partners Nashville Rescue Mission, ShowerUp Nashville, Room in the Inn and People Loving Nashville.