

# Editorial: Possible Baptist Building sale part of national trend

March 28, 2014

We are not alone.

Texas Baptists, that is. We're not the only American religious group [looking to sell its primary office property](#).

As you may recall, messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Texas' annual meeting authorized the BGCT Executive Board and an ad hoc committee to consider selling the Baptist Building.



Editor Marv KnoxIt's located on prime property east of downtown Dallas, adjacent to the Baylor Health Care System's flagship campus. Baylor University has expressed interest in buying the building for its nursing school, which already leases space there.

At the Executive Board's winter meeting, Executive Director David Hardage [announced](#) Baylor University had extended a "multifaceted" offer for the building. The ad hoc committee is expected to report to the Executive Board in May.

In this, we're not alone, according to Martin Marty, one of America's pre-

eminent church historians and a professor emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Numerous U.S. religious organizations are selling their “headquarters,” he noted.

Marty details the phenomenon in the latest edition of his [online newsletter, “Sightings.”](#) He credits an [article in \*The New York Times\*](#) by Michael Paulson, who cites research by James Hudnut-Beumler, a professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University.

Religious organizations involved in the property-selling/downsizing trend include:

- **The Unitarian Universalist Association.** For more than 125 years, it has owned property adjacent to the Massachusetts Statehouse on Beacon Hill in Boston. The UUA is selling its headquarters, plus two homes and an office building. It’s moving to an “innovation district” in South Boston.
- **The Jehovah’s Witnesses.** The JWs have been selling 34 buildings in the regentrifying Brooklyn Heights and Dumbo districts of Brooklyn. They’re moving to a 253-acre campus up the Hudson Valley in Warwick, N.Y.
- **Cokesbury,** the United Methodist publishing house, is selling its facilities in downtown Nashville and moving elsewhere in the city. The Methodists expect a windfall, because the new Music City convention center, near Cokesbury, drove up real estate prices in the neighborhood.
- **Our cousins, the American Baptist Churches,** have rented out part of their building in King of Prussia, Pa., because their downsized staff doesn’t need all that space. Now, they are considering selling the facility and moving elsewhere in the Philadelphia area.

- **At least eight Catholic dioceses** have sold or are planning to sell their chanceries. They include Boston; Brooklyn; Charleston, S.C.; Detroit; Green Bay, Wis.; Los Angeles; Orange County, Calif.; and Spokane, Wash.

The denominational sell-off is a growing trend, Hudnut-Beumler told *The Times*. “They’re finding themselves pressed for finances, and making some hard choices about property, and so we’re seeing more sales in the last decade than we had for the last century,” he said.

The research points to three common factors—with almost every religious group claiming at least two—for selling an existing denominational office buildings. Budgets are tight, and large denominational organizations are strapped for cash in what *The Times’* headline refers to as a “more secular era.” Many of the properties sit in historically prominent or currently booming real estate markets, and they’re experiencing a seller’s market. Communication technology and changing operational strategies make working from home and telecommuting not only possible, but also attractive, so organizations need less central office space.

All three factors line up with Texas Baptists’ situation. They’re among variables in an equation that indicates our convention must be willing to make major changes, Hardage [has said](#).

### **Future ‘weighs in the balance’**

“The future—not just of the Texas Baptist convention, but of Texas and of what we need to do for (God’s) kingdom—weighs in the balance,” he told the Executive Board. “We must adjust our mindset and our hearts to do whatever it takes to impact Texas for the gospel.”

Historian Marty reflected that kind of thinking as he described religious groups’ increasing inclination to sell their “headquarters.”

“Planners in religious agencies may regret turning the key to close the Big House doors for the last time, but wise planners are using their skills and energies to advance their work through nonelite, less-strategically located bases of operation,” he wrote. “Readers who support a variety of religious organizations that seek to serve through efficient means are unable to locate the headquarters of most of these. These readers tend to get their sense of beauty and awe from their effective works and their awareness of the lives they change.”

If that concept seems familiar, it’s because we’re not alone.