

Board of Directors Resource: Property and Facilities Purposeful Church Buildings

Developed by Rev. Elder Donald Eastman, 01 August 1998

Introduction

Throughout much of Christian history it has been common to think of a church building as the "house of God" offering "sanctuary," a holy place set apart where we find refuge in God's presence. The "sanctuary" is that place set aside exclusively for worship, for rites, for instruction. Churches are places where we come to meet God. Much of this imagery is influenced by the place of tabernacle and temple in the history of Israel. So, our most common perception of a church building is that of a sacred space.

The great irony of the history of church buildings in Christianity is that most of it is foreign to the teachings of the New Testament and the experience of the earliest Christians. Hear what they wrote of temples and tabernacles: "God does not live in temples made by human hands." (Acts 17:24) "Don't you realize that all of you together are the house of God, and the Spirit of God lives among you in God's house?" (I Corinthians 3:16) "You have become living building stones for God's use in building God's house." (I Peter 2:5) "When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, he entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands . . ." (Hebrews 9:11). During the first three hundred years of Christian mission, its most dynamic period of expansion, few church buildings existed. Early Christians did meet in synagogues which were gathering places for instruction and prayer. The earliest Christian meetings and meeting-places were modeled on the pattern of the synagogues. But one of the most striking features of primitive Christian worship was that it so often centered in homes.

In his book, *Radical Renewal: The Problem of Wineskins Today*, Howard Snyder says that a church building cannot correctly be God's house "because in the new covenant this title is reserved for the church as people (Eph. 2, I Tim. 3:15, Heb. 10:21). A church building cannot be a 'holy place' in any special sense, for holy places no longer exist, and all creation is sacred. Christianity has no holy places, only holy people. Christians know that God is present everywhere, for the earth is God's."

The idea of "sacred space" has given rise to breathtaking expressions of art and architecture. Many church buildings are beautiful and inspiring. But often, those inspiring, beautiful buildings are monuments to pride, immobility and stagnation. There is a tension here that begs for balance. We humans were created with senses to appreciate beauty. In a recent address to the American Institute of Architecture, church historian and futurist Leonard Sweet said, "Beauty is not an indulgence, or some expensive option. Aesthetics has everything to do with health. The church has a disease: it's called the 'uglies.' It's a chilling disease that won't be allowed past the Pearly Gates." Sweet went on to suggest ten commandments for healthy church

architecture. Church buildings inherently are not good or bad, but they are inevitable. They are not the church. Snyder says the justification for church buildings "can only be practical; simply a place to meet and carry on the essential functions of the church." The functional needs of churches vary greatly, depending on culture, theology and philosophy of ministry. Here, there is great value in the long-standing architectural adage, "form follows function."

Application

Consideration must be given first to the geographic and cultural context in which your church operates. What may be ideal or essential in one setting, is irrelevant or unnecessary in another. For example, one of the most critical needs for churches in Midwestern cities of the U.S.A. is ample parking onsite at a church. For churches in major cities highly dependant on mass transit, such as London or New York, being close to a subway station is more important. Economic realities are profoundly different from place to place, influencing how property is owned and used. Much of what follows is based largely on the urban realities in North America, so here we acknowledge the need for its adaptation or rejection in other countries and cultures as may be relevant and helpful.

Who are you trying to impress? Who are the primary constituents your church wishes to reach and serve? For most churches, the accurate answer is "our church family." Features of church facilities must appeal to and accommodate desires of the church family. Such is the context for church fights over the color of carpet, choice of kitchen appliances or a myriad of other petty issues. Another answer to the basic question is "the purpose of our church is to reach and include unchurched outsiders." This answer will bring a fundamental shift in the way you think about church buildings and facilities.

Consider the culture of the constituency you want to reach and serve. The typical Metropolitan Community Church is made up mostly of people born between 1946 and 1964. Known as the Boomers, this group is the largest generational subset in the USA. The younger generation, often called Generation X or Postmodern Generation, was born between 1965 and 1981. During the youthful lifetime of this generation, a global cultural shift has been moving the church from the culture of the page to the culture of the screen. And, says Leonard Sweet, "The paradigm of the church can't change without altering the physical work space of the church." For instance, to meet the needs of the Postmodern Generation requires some new and innovative approaches to worship. (An excellent discussion of 21st Century worship is found in Bill Easum's *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*.) Will your church remain a comfort zone of the status quo for aging Boomers? Or, will your church take seriously the call to make disciples of the next generation?

Buildings and facilities should be seen as tools to help a church achieve its mission, and as an investment in people, not property. A frequent decision of churches, especially newer and smaller congregations, is whether to rent or own their

buildings and facilities. Leasing space is extremely common for the "planting" of new congregations in North America. Increasingly, churches can be found in business districts, shopping centers and office buildings. Saddleback Community Church, a well-known mega-church in southern California, began in 1980 with seven people. It worshiped in 79 rented locations, and grew to a congregation of 10,000 before moving into its own buildings on a 74-acre campus in 1995. Pastor Rick Warren says, "Our vision never has really focused on getting big or erecting buildings; instead our vision has been to produce disciples of Jesus Christ."

Another factor influencing the needs of your church for facilities is its philosophy of ministry. Churches have differing approaches to ministry based upon beliefs and values, ethical and social expectations, worship styles, ethnic and cultural influences, denominational affiliation and the congregation's sense of purpose, vision and mission. In most churches, the philosophy of ministry is simply a given, woven into the fabric of ongoing congregational life. There is a decided advantage, however, for your church to intentionally engage consideration, clarification, reflection and, if indicated, revision of its philosophy of ministry. For help with this, see the Benchmarks of Excellence for Purpose, Vision, Mission. Clarity about philosophy of ministry will greatly enhance your ability to discern the best choices for church buildings and facilities.

Guiding Principles

1. The people of God are the house of God. Church buildings and facilities serve only as instruments for the church to fulfill its mission.
2. Form should follow function. Clarity of values, purpose, vision and mission must inform the selection and development of church facilities.
3. Physical space for the meetings and ministries of each church must be relevant to the culture, experience and needs of the people that church body is called to reach and serve.
4. Aesthetics in the physical spaces of churches is not an extravagance to the God who created beauty. Creativity is a gift from God, and its expression is a witness of our gifts to God and the world. Creative giftedness often results in sensory experiences of space, form, texture, color, and sound which can be profoundly transformative.
5. Never surrender the leadership of your church's ministry to a piece of real estate. No church property or facility should become a shrine to the past or sanctuary from the future.

Diagnostic Questions for Self-Assessment

Developed by Rev. Elder Don Eastman, August 3, 1998

Program/Planning

A standard architectural tool for planning and design of space is the program of needs. This is a written document stating physical goals. It itemizes facility needs and desires for all of the functions of your church. Clarity of purpose, values, vision, and mission is prerequisite to developing a good program of needs. The services of good design professionals--architects and/or interior designers--are invaluable in producing more functional and efficient church facilities.

Questions:

Within the past five years, has your church engaged in a process, such as strategic planning, of defining its purpose, values, vision and mission? Has your church defined realistic projections of growth? Does your church have a group, team or committee specifically charged with planning of physical space needs? Is this group comprised mostly of people who use the church space, rather than mainly people who design and create the space? Has your church developed a written program of needs including space for worship and other large gatherings, fellowship, education and other small group functions, administration, recreation and parking? Does the program of needs identify issues of desired exterior and interior appearance? Does it describe how different parts of the building are to relate to each other, to entrances, to parking and to streets?

Accessible/Welcoming

You get one chance to make a first impression. For most newcomers visiting your church, that impression begins with their experience of your church facility. It is likely that 8 to 10 percent of the people in your worship services every Sunday are visitors. Most of them will be very aware of ways in which your church conveys care, quality, sincerity, sensitivity and excellence. And within the first ten to fifteen minutes of entering your church property, most first-time visitors will decide whether they want to return

Questions

Do attractive, visible and legible signs identify your church's location? Is the exterior appearance of your church's meeting space attractive, clean, well-maintained? Does well-groomed landscaping enhance the appearance of your church location? Are the parking and entrance areas of your church visible, well-lighted and configured to increase security? Does your church have adequate parking close to its meeting facility, preferably onsite? In most Metropolitan Community Churches this means at least one parking space for each two seats in the worship space. Do you reserve

preferred parking spaces, at least 4 to 8 percent of the total number of spaces closest to the building entrance, for visitors? Are the entrances to your church clearly marked and easy to find? Does your church have a comfortable, attractive gathering area (this could be a lobby, patio or fellowship area) adjacent to the worship space? Ideally, the total space for the gathering area should be one-third the size of the worship space. Within the gathering area do you have a hospitality or information center for newcomers? Is your church fully accessible to persons with disabilities? Does it conform to the Americans With Disabilities Act or comparable legislation if your church is in another country? Have your church's restrooms been refurbished within the past three years? Are they cleaned and restocked with supplies at all times?

Worship Environment

In the book, *First Impressions: How to Present an Inviting Church Facility*, Ron A. Lee says there are two dimensions through which worship inspiration is physically developed: music and architecture. Music is said to be the language of the soul. "The worshiper is nurtured, healed and redirected by the process of worship, and music plays a major role in that process." The dynamic of architecture also nurtures worship. Gwenn McCormick, a church building planning specialist for the Southern Baptists, says, "the environment has significant power over our emotions. Therefore, the places where we gather should make positive, uplifting contributions to life-changing experiences. It should be a place that invites and enhances celebration."

Questions:

Is your congregation clear about whom it desires to reach and serve through the worship experiences at your church? Has your church clearly defined its philosophy of ministry regarding worship? Is your worship space planned and configured effectively to facilitate a comfortable experience for those you wish to reach and serve? Does it provide proper crowding ratios: seating space that is filled to at least 50% by your congregation but not more than 85% on a regular basis? Are the seats comfortable, preferably with padding? Does it allow sufficient space of at least 36 inches back-to-back between rows of seating? Is your worship space clean and bright, is it well-lighted and well-maintained with effective use of color? Does it include design elements such as banners, plants, or other decorations that can be changed periodically to add new perspectives to the worship environment? Is it congregation-focused rather than altar-focused? Do the design and configuration of your worship space intentionally support and facilitate a high priority on music? For instance, does it take advantage of the newer technology of musical instruments?

Ministry Support Space

Spiritual growth through healthy relationships is the essence of effective discipleship. Among the most important functions of today's growing churches are those that facilitate personal growth through the development of new and meaningful relationships. Most often these congregations provide a wide range of ministry activities. They are what church development expert Lyle Schaller calls full-service congregations in *The Seven-Day A Week Church*. In addition to excellent worship, ideal church facilities accommodate multiple daily ministry support activities for educational, social and other purposes.

Questions:

Does your church facility include an area for social and fellowship functions? Is that area easily accessible, preferably adjacent to the entry and worship space? Does your church provide spaces for multiple simultaneous small group meetings of less than 16 people? Does that meeting space provide an area of at least 12 square feet per person for adults and 20 square feet per person for adults? Is all meeting space clean, uncluttered, bright, attractive and well-maintained? Is all meeting space configured and maintained in conformance with applicable risk prevention and management guidelines?

Efficiency/Flexibility

In a very useful book, *When Not to Build*, church architect Ray Bowman says, "Except for offices, almost every room of your church facility can be designed for multiple use, enabling it to be used repeatedly on Sundays and intensively the other six days of the week. Such a design can reduce the amount of floor space needed per person by 40 or 50 percent and reduce the cost of construction accordingly. Because a multi-use building requires so much less of the congregation's time, money, and energy than does a traditional design, it can be one of the most valuable ministry tools your church could have for playing a key role in keeping the church's focus on people rather than buildings."

Questions:

Does your church conduct a periodic review of its space to determine maximum efficiency of usage? Can space that is not presently used most effectively be adapted for better purposes with minor remodeling? Are activities assigned to rooms on the basis of group size? Can some activities happen as effectively at alternate locations? Can the worship space in your church be configured for other uses too? Movable individual seating is preferable to fixed seating, and usually increases seating capacity by 20 percent. Does your building have ample storage space? Churches used heavily for multiple purposes usually require more storage space. Can you build or rent more storage space if necessary?

Funding/Financing

A typical North American congregation spends from 25 percent to 55 percent of its budget on building facilities including rent or mortgage payments and the maintenance and operation of the facilities. It is also common for rapidly growing congregations to spend a higher percentage of their budgets on buildings than congregations with plateaued or declining attendance. A key question will be "at what level, does the amount of money spent on buildings or facilities limit the congregation in effectively carrying out its mission?" Usually, the answer will be "beyond 25 percent in a congregation with a stable attendance, and beyond 35 percent in a growing congregation." If your church is planning to acquire and/or develop building facilities the following guidelines are helpful: 1) Through typical three-year pledged capital campaigns, churches commonly raise from 1.7 to 2.5 times their annual budgets; 2) Financing institutions will rarely finance more than 75 percent of the property's value, and often require the ratio be less than 65 percent; and, 3) Most finance institutions will not allow the debt service (payments) to exceed one-third of your church's annual income. In the USA, most financial institutions do not like to lend money to churches.

Questions:

Whether you rent or own church facilities, does the cost of those facilities exceed 35 percent of your churches annual un designated income? If you own your church property does the debt exceed three times your annual church revenue? If you own your church property, does the debt exceed 75 percent of the property's value?

Resources and Bibliography

compiled by Rev. Elder Don Eastman; updated 05 August 1998
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Phone 800 242-3837

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PO Box 6267
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Phone 800 956-7739

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