

# Balanced Space

**Derek Gentle**

## **Your church has different kinds of space.**

Growth space includes: parking, the education building, and the worship center (sanctuary). In the education building, there are different kinds of space. There are rooms for preschoolers (birth through kindergarten), children (grades 1-6), youth (grades 7-12), and adults.

There are other important kinds of space in a church facility. There is also fellowship space, office space, recreation space, and storage. These are important too, in their different ways.

## **Your church needs balanced space.**

Balanced space means the capacity in each kind of space properly complements the capacity in the others. Balanced space means:

- You worship center should have a capacity sufficient to support your education space and to take care of those people who attend worship, but not Sunday School.
- Your parking lot supports the maximum capacity of your worship center.
- Your education space supports the capacity of your worship center.
- Your education building has the right mix of spaces for the various age groups.

**Generally, a worship center should have a capacity of 110-120% of education space.** More people attend worship services than Sunday School. Some members are elderly or have health concerns that mean they can attend for only one hour, and they elect to attend the worship service. Others simply don't want to attend Sunday School. People looking for a new church home will usually visit a worship service before visiting a Sunday School class. So, worship attendance is generally 110-120% of your Sunday School attendance. You don't want to get below that. If you get too far above that, then you could have a half-filled room which would hurt morale.

## **Your parking lot should support the maximum capacity of your worship center.**

Those who attend Sunday School get the first pick of the parking spaces. Those who arrive later for worship have to take what's left over. If there isn't a good parking space—or a space they can easily locate—they will often give up and go home. They simply will not drive around your parking lot seeking the last remaining parking space. In most places, the average is a fraction less than 2 people coming to church in one car or truck. Teenagers often take their own cars. Sometimes, it may seem a family of five will come in four cars. So, churches have to provide more parking than we used to.

To calculate how much parking your church needs: Count the cars on your highest attendance day of the year - Easter or homecoming Sunday. Then add enough spaces on top of that to make room for visitors and for growth. If that Sunday is eleven months off, then count the cars for several Sundays. Take the attendance and divide it by the number of cars—that's your average number of people per vehicle. Then, take your largest attendance for the past year and divide by the average number of people per vehicle. That's the number of spaces you will need. Don't forget to add extra spaces for growth.

### **Your education space should support the capacity of your worship center.**

While more people attend worship services than Sunday School, most of the people who attend Sunday School stay for worship. If your education building has a capacity of 60, that would not be enough to fill a worship center with a capacity of 120. Most congregations won't have enough people coming in just for worship to make up the difference. Certainly, special occasions in the worship services, such as homecoming, will be exceptions. However, a church with unbalanced space, as this is, will not fill its worship center on a week-in, week-out basis.

### **Your education building should have the right mix for the various age groups.**

In rough numbers, a church will often have 15% of its Sunday School attendance in preschool classes, 15% in children's classes, 13% in youth classes, and 57% in college, adult classes, and general officers (exact percentages vary somewhat). Each age group has its own needs in relation to their rooms. The different age groups require varying amounts of space per person.

#### **Preschool Space (Bed Babies to Kindergarten)**

It surprises some that the younger the person, the more space they need. However, as we think about it, it makes sense. Adults go into a classroom, sit in a chair, and won't move until the class is over. Little ones would find that to be a form of torture. Preschoolers learn by playing and need room to move around. In younger preschool rooms, changing tables and baby beds are needed. We could put three adults in the space taken up by one baby bed. The older preschool rooms need kitchen sets, tables, bookshelves, toys, etc. For preschoolers, 35 square feet per child is the standard. 32 square feet is the minimum required by Alabama law in day care facilities. This is what parents are used to seeing provided for their children. When they consider joining your church, this is what they will be looking for. To get a picture of what this amount of space looks like, imagine each child and worker getting his or her own playpen. That's the amount of space you need in your preschool rooms.

#### **Children's Space (Grades 1-6)**

Children need a little less space than preschoolers - 25 square feet per child. Like preschoolers, they need to move around. You will need room for tables, equipment, and learning activities.

#### **Youth (Grades 7-12)**

Youth need at least 12-15 feet per person in their classrooms. Adult rooms work fine for youth. If you have a dual use room for youth that serves as an opening assembly area *and* as a classroom, then you will want to provide a little extra room. The room used as an open room department needs 15-18 square feet per person. Be sure to take this in consideration if this is the room used for Wednesday night youth Bible studies, or something similar.

#### **Adults**

Adults need 12-15 square feet per person in their classrooms. However, if a classroom has a table for a coffee pot, decorative furniture, a piano, etc., you have to deduct the space they take up from the total square feet in the room. There is nothing wrong with those things, but naturally, we can't sit on top of the piano. If adults sit around a table, then the capacity of the room is the number of chairs you can fit around the table, regardless of the number of square feet in the room.

### **Preschoolers need almost as much space as all your adults!**

Say you have a church that averages 100 people in Sunday School. Say the preschoolers average 15 in attendance. That doesn't mean they need 15% of the total floor space in your education building! We have seen why preschoolers and children need more square feet per person. 15 preschoolers with 35 square feet per person adds up to a total of 525 square feet. By comparison, the adults are averaging 55 people in attendance. At 12 square feet per person, they will need a total of 660 square feet. So the preschoolers need almost as much space as all of those adults put together, even though there are far fewer of them. Yet, in many churches, preschoolers are assigned the smallest rooms in the church.

### **Children may not care about their space, but their parents do**

Some may say, "But the children don't care what kind of space they are in!" However, parents do care... a lot! Moms and dads are more particular than ever about the quality of space their children are in. If it's not clean, fresh-smelling, attractive, and roomy enough, the parents will not bring them back. The preschool class will not be the only class that is hurt by this; the young married class loses the parents as potential members also. One of the keys for reaching young families is quality preschool and children's space.

The size and quality of the room impacts the learning environment in ways neither we nor the children may realize. At our church, a class of preschoolers was in a room that was much too small. We were in a building program, and just had to live with the inadequate space until the new building was completed. It was noticed after the class moved into the new space that the children seemed happier and cried less frequently. The size of the classroom had made a difference.

### **Unless there is ample room, there isn't room**

The "80% Rule" states that when any space is averaging 80% of its capacity, for growth purposes, it is full. Summer vacations and holiday weekends will be lower than 80%. Other Sundays will be higher. Easter Sundays will fill the room to capacity. But over the course of the year, 80% is the pretty much the best you can hope to average—unless revival has broken out or you are in a building program and there is "light at the end of the tunnel." This rule of thumb applies to every Sunday School class, the worship center, the parking lot, and even the choir loft.

People don't like to pack in like sardines. A full classroom (or choir loft) communicates to prospects that another person isn't needed. If a visiting family walks into a worship center they will want to sit together, but if they can't find that many seats together, for all practical purposes the room is full. Put another way: If you are looking for a new classroom for a class that averages eight, you need to find them a room that will hold more than ten.

### **Building for where you are going, not where you are**

If you are planning a building, build for where you are trying to go, not for where you are now. Establish what you think you can average in attendance. Then, using the 80% rule, build 125% of the space needed for that average. For example, if your church expects to average 80, build enough space for 100 (multiply 80 by 125% and you get 100). If you build for 80 people, you will average only 64.

### **Is there a “space choke-point” for your church’s growth?**

If any one kind of space is too small for your church, then it can serve as a glass ceiling for your entire church’s capacity. Sometimes things get to going really well in the life of the church for a while and attendance may rise above this ceiling. But then attendance settles back down to the old “normal” level. No one seems to be able explain what happened. It is a subconscious thing, but people are adjusting the crowd size to fit the building. One age-group’s space or type of space can hold back the entire church. This could be the parking lot, or the preschool space, or the children’s space, or the worship center. But if the space is out of balance, growth will stop when the smallest space has reached its capacity.

### **Recommended Action Steps**

1. Study your space. Know the capacity for each classroom. Know how many adults/youth, children, or preschoolers you could put in each classroom. Do you have room to grow?
2. Decide whether your space is balanced or not. Consider parking, the worship center, and each age group in Sunday School.
3. Consider whether you need to reassign classrooms to overcome a “space choke-point” and get space back into balance. Determine if unused rooms could be converted to classrooms to provide room for growth.
4. Consider whether you need to build new space or expand your parking.