

What You're Looking For in a Space Study

Every congregation should periodically evaluate the quantity and quality of their space. Some areas of consideration are listed below:

Visibility & Accessibility

Many times a church will build somewhere off the beaten path, perhaps in a subdivision, but no one will pass the church on the way to work or to the grocery store. They never consider visiting – they don't know the church exists. Other times, churches will build in plain sight, perhaps by an Interstate, but no one can figure out how to get from the Interstate to the building – so clear accessibility is important also. A poor location limits your potential.

The Importance of “Curb Appeal”

Imagine you are driving down the Interstate with your family on vacation and you need to purchase gas for the car and to let the children go to the restroom. You get off the exit ramp to find two stations. One is older and looks a little worn with the years. There is rust on sides of the metal building. There are grease spots on the asphalt parking lot. On the other side of the road is a brand new station. Everything at this station looks new and clean. Which one are you going to stop at? Even if Dad wants to stop at the one with best gas price, Mom is not going to allow her babies to go to the restroom in that dump!

Curb appeal issues include such matters as your sign, the appearance of the front of your building, your parking lot, and an obvious entrance to your building. People who don't know any of your members, know only what they see of you as they drive by. Curb appeal is your first impression and, as we all know, you get only one opportunity to make a first impression.

The Home and Office Rule

There is a rule of thumb regarding building quality: a church building should be at least as nice as the homes people are building and the offices where people work in the community. Consider that other public buildings around you may be setting the standard. For example, has a new school been built? Are people still buying groceries in the same grocery stores near you since your church was built? No one wants to take a “step down” in the quality of their accommodations to attend church.

An additional factor is the rising standard of living we in America have been blessed to enjoy. Over the last fifty years, homes have been built larger and nicer. I am 50; when I was little, our house was 1400 square feet (a very typical size for the community). Now, the new homes that are built there are around 2200 square feet. When we lived there, we had window unit air conditioners (which at the time, was better than what most folks had); now no one builds a home in Alabama without central air. The homes built now look nicer and have more conveniences. Here's the problem: as our homes get nicer, existing church buildings look older and frumpier.

Preschool and Children's Space

Most mothers work outside the home now. Thus, many mothers use Day Care centers to care for their children while they are at work. When selecting a church, these mothers will compare what they see five days a week at the day care to what they see in the church preschool room. The day care is in a competitive business; they know they have to provide nice facilities to attract client families. Additionally, state law requires such facilities to meet certain standards. This mother will be comparing the quality and

quantity of your church's space to that of the day care she uses. If your church doesn't provide space that meets that level of expectation, she will continue her search for another church home. It will not matter that the government does not require churches to meet these standards, that the building provides wonderful memories for its members, or that it worked just fine when the senior adult members were raising their children. That mother has a picture in her mind of what she thinks it's supposed to look like and she's out of there!

It is a surprise to many that preschool and children's spaces should be so large. People guess that since children are smaller, they need smaller spaces. Actually, the correct principle is that since preschoolers are more active, they need *more* space. Adults sit down in chairs and don't move around the room during Sunday School. Not so with preschoolers and children.

LifeWay calls for 35 square feet per person in preschool classes (sometimes a church can make 25 square feet per person do in a pinch) and 25 square feet per person in classes for children, grades 1-6.

Again, this is what people are used to in the outside world. For example, the state of Alabama requires – by law – a *minimum* of 32 square feet per child in day care facilities.

There shall be at least 32 square feet of indoor activity space for each child. Bathrooms, kitchens, isolation room, office, halls used as passageways, and storage areas shall not be considered when computing activity space.

*MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR DAY CARE CENTERS AND NIGHTTIME CENTERS
REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURE
Prescribed by: State of Alabama Department of Human Resources*

Balanced Space

The basic idea is that your parking lot has to provide enough parking places for enough people to be able to attend your largest service. Your Sunday School has to provide enough space for every age group – and you can grow to be only as large as the smallest age-group space will allow. Inadequate space for any one age group can be a bottleneck to growth for the overall congregation. Finally, your worship space and your education space have to match each other in capacity (after factoring in preschoolers and workers in childcare and adding the percentage who attend your worship services who do not attend Sunday School).

The 80% Rule

When your attendance average – over the course of a year – is 80% of your rated capacity, then growth will stop. Some Sundays will be higher, some will be lower, Easter may be over capacity, holiday weekends may be very much below capacity – but we speak here of your average over the course of the year.

People like to have a little elbow room. They do not like to be packed in like sardines. For some reason, visitors feel awkward taking the last available chair. The 80% rule applies to your Sunday School classrooms, to your worship center, to your choir loft, and to your parking lot. It even applies to preschool and children's rooms. Even though they don't drive themselves to church, their parents will stop bringing them if the room looks too crowded. If you were building a new classroom for an existing class of, say, 8 people

in average attendance, you would need to build it at 125% of 8 (that is, for a capacity of 10) to keep your room from being over 80% full. Now if you want that class to *grow*, you will want to add additional capacity above 10. Rated capacities can be found for each age group in the document, *Rules of Thumb*, from LifeWay.

Land Area

One acre will provide space for 100 to 125 people at one time. Parking requires about one acre per 100 cars. If you have a septic tank and field lines, you can't build anything on top of that. If you are in a city with codes concerning setbacks or green areas, that means more land area will be required. Recreational areas require two to four acres. Remember, you will want to provide yourselves room for future growth. What may be enough land now, may not be enough later. Don't limit your future by buying only enough land for the size church you are now.

Folks Like Us Make a Church Like Ours...

A Church Like Ours Can Reach Folks Like Us

When a community starts growing and new people start moving in, there is often the question of whether their church will appeal to new folks moving in. This starts with curb appeal (discussed above), but includes more than that. They will ask themselves, "Are these folks like us?" "Will we fit in there?" "Will they let us in?" Sometimes a congregation can enjoy themselves so much they are blind to barriers they unwittingly put up to the new people moving in. A church has to determine if they are able to reach the new folks moving into the community and, then, make conscious choices to establish new classes and groups to make these new people comfortable and include them. Do you have the classrooms to start those new classes?

Ministry Plans Determine Building Plans

This point has been saved for last because it is the most important. Is your ministry plan shaping your building plans or does your building dictate your ministry plans? Does your church need to have certain events, but you don't have the right kind of space for it? The building can become the tail that wags the dog!

On the other hand, it is not enough to have quality classrooms if you don't train teachers to teach a half-decent lesson. It is not enough to have a wonderful worship center if you don't have true worship taking place. Buildings don't do ministry, people do. Unattractive buildings may keep people from attending a church, but attractive buildings won't keep them coming back if they aren't ministered to. Every congregation needs a ministry plan with details and deadlines to help them become the church God wants them to be.

What you will do in the building should determine how you build! God's people need a comprehensive strategy for ministry and evangelism to guide them as they plan their new buildings.