



Wasted Space Wasted Opportunity

Dan R. Dick

A church that attracts a large number of people, offers a wide variety of programs, is financially sound, and provides engaging worship is generally considered to be a “successful” church. Common measures of success are full pews and parking lots on Sunday morning, relatively full collection plates, a full slate of hired and elected congregational leaders, and a growing—if not stable—membership roster. Each of these factors contributes to the measure of a church’s effectiveness, but there is another factor—much less obvious—that reflects deep and significant vitality: the use of space.

American Protestant churches are among the greatest space wasters of all public-use facilities. The vast majority of sanctuaries—huge open spaces—are used only two or three hours a week. The majority of rooms designated for Sunday school classes are used one hour each week. Fellowship halls stand empty 90–95 percent of the time. Church parlors are often used once or twice a month, and many church libraries haven’t seen any action since the late 1970s. In churches with declining involvement, once trafficked rooms now serve as storage areas. In a recent survey conducted by the General

Board of Discipleship, two of every three churches (64 percent) report having rooms that stand empty on a regular to constant basis. Paradoxically, almost half of these churches are planning to expand or relocate to create more space for ministry. One church with fourteen empty Sunday school

rooms just completed construction of a four-million-dollar Christian Life Center that is used approximately twelve hours a week on average. Of all the practices of congregational stewardship, our understanding and use of space is perhaps the worst.

Churches that provide a powerful and healthy usage model do so by overcoming five critical limiting factors. Each factor poses a unique constraint causing church facilities to be underutilized and ministry potential to remain unrealized. These factors are:

- territorial protection of space;
- an “us/them” mentality that prevents sharing space with those outside the congregation;
- a lack of vision for missional ministry and outreach;
- a strong sense of “church” happening only on Sunday;
- pride of architecture and status.

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Territorial Protection of Space

In almost every church in existence, different segments of the congregation claim for themselves discreet, exclusive, and private space. Kitchens, parlors, Sunday school rooms, meeting rooms, and fellowship halls are just some of the areas that can become battlegrounds in local churches. Heaven help the poor person who dribbles punch on the parlor rug or fails to put the coffee urn back in the “right” place. Youth and young adults are often relegated to less-favorable spaces in the church, and they are expected to stay “where they belong.” Until a congregation’s members can learn to share, facility space is a limiting factor instead of a resource for ministry and service.

Leaders in many congregations relate that territorial issues are generally hidden, unspoken, and unexplored until there is a violation. Then they become a trigger for conflict. The best time to explore the use of shared space is when there are no controversies. One church navigated a re-visioning of space usage by referring to the whole church facility as “God-space.” This allowed them not only to learn to share within the congregation but also moved them to see new possibilities of sharing their facility with their community.

An “Us/Them” Mentality

Many congregational members view their church building as . . . their church building. The only people who have any right to use the facility are church members. Overcoming this divisive, noninclusive mind-set is a huge hurdle to clear for many local churches. A large number of churches define their ministry as what they do for, provide for, and offer to others. Occasionally, a church may open space to a daycare center, a thrift shop, or a soup kitchen, but even in these cases there is a clear “landlord/tenant” relationship rather than a true partnership in ministry. The goal of many growing congregations is to expand the number of ministries they can provide, but they only consider those that they own and control as “ministry.”

Every community has a wide variety of social, relief, crisis, and assistance agencies with limited resources. Space—adequate facility—is usually one of the greatest needs. The services and programs these agencies provide align very clearly and closely with the mission and ministry of most churches. The opportunities to marry skills, knowledge, and expertise to underutilized church space are almost limitless. Churches with strong, workable partnerships in their communities create these relationships from a strong vision for ministry with the community.

When the church building is viewed as the center and location of ministry, leaders do all they can to draw as many people as possible into the building. However, when the field of opportunity for ministry is located in the community, the church building pales in comparison; it is seen as a resource for ministry rather than a key focus of ministry.

Too many congregations offer most—if not all—of their ministries and programs to the existing membership. This inward vision for ministry may be powerful and comprehensive, but it is still one-dimensional. Until a congregation develops a broad vision for ministry—not only for others and to others, but with others—it is limited in the way it envisions the use of space.

“When we started thinking in terms of sharing ministry—doing ministry with other people—it freed us to dream much bigger dreams,” one pastor reflected. “There are so many needs that we cannot begin to fill by ourselves, but when we link our resources with those of others, virtually nothing is impossible to us. I’m not sure why nobody ever taught us this in seminary.”

This is a simple, rational, and sensible idea—together we are capable of much more than we are on our own. This is as true of congregations—and their community counterparts—as it is of

individuals. Many congregational leaders claim that the turning point came by asking, “What does God want us to be doing?” instead of “What can we do for God?”

Church Happens Only On Sunday

The lay leader of a midwestern United Methodist Church tells the story of a congregational epiphany when a new member asked the congregation’s leaders what it would take for every room in the church to be used every day of the week:

“We never thought about the church building being used seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. It changed our entire way of thinking about church.”

The vast majority of Protestant churches in North America hold one (or possibly two) services in the sanctuary in a given week. Most Sunday school rooms are dedicated space, for use only by the class that meets there. The myth is that large churches are seven-day-a-week churches; activity depends on size. However, a growing number of smaller congregations—

one hundred members or less—offer worship services every day of the week and hold multiple classes and studies throughout the week. Additionally, they offer tutoring, health screening, counseling, skills training, and a host of other services every day.

Pride of Architecture and Status

Among the most perplexing stewardship issues concerning the use of church space are the number of churches that are considering expansion, building, or relocation at a time when they are not using the space they already have. The pastor of a growing southeastern church provides a representative opinion when he says, “We want big, new, and beautiful. An old, failing church does nothing to honor God. People in our culture, especially baby boomers, will not settle for anything but the best. If we want to grow we need the biggest church, with the latest equipment, a state-of-the-art nursery, and

abundant parking close to the building. The only way to be the best is to keep ahead of the competition.”

This is a matter of values. When the church building is viewed as the center and location of ministry, leaders do all they can to draw as many people as possible into the building. However, when the field of opportunity for ministry is located in the community, the church building pales in comparison; it is seen as a resource for ministry rather than a key focus of ministry. There are church buildings—big and small, old and new, in prime locations and out of the way places—that are excellent stewards of space, using what they have to the utmost.

There is one other powerful argument against using church buildings for ministry: insurance and liability. Conversations with lawyers and insurance agents lead to one simple response—baloney! If there is a ministry need and a partnership opportunity—even in this litigious and contentious age—there is a viable way to provide adequate protection.

The church exists for one purpose: ministry. The more ministry we can do, the better we can honor and glorify God. The best way to expand our ministries is to open our doors and use every resource at our disposal, including the church building, to serve the greatest number of needs. An important function for leaders of every congregation is to explore space considerations: territoriality, the “us/them” mentality, the vision for ministry, the use of the facility seven days a week, and the importance of architecture versus stewardship and service. □



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congregational leadership, his latest title is *Beyond Money: Becoming Good and Faithful Stewards* (Discipleship Resources, 2006). See page 19 to order.

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