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## **TEACHING OLD CHURCH BUILDINGS NEW TRICKS**

by Eddy Hall

“This building was designed for a congregation of 265,” one church member argued at a congregational meeting. “The architect told us so. We can’t grow any bigger than that in this building.”

Over this gentleman’s objection, the congregation went ahead and invited a facilities consultant to help them find ways to make maximum use of their building. A few months later they had a remodeling and utilization plan that would allow them to grow to 750 with no new construction.

A church in Warsaw, Indiana, which averages about 450 in two worship services, had spent several years studying options for how to accommodate growth. The best option they had come up with involved two additions totaling \$4.2 million plus interest. Feeling stuck, they asked a consultant for help.

Instead of requiring millions of dollars for construction, their new facility plan calls for a few hundred thousand dollars of remodeling and some utilization changes that together provide enough room for attendance to almost double. After that, a \$1.1 million multi-purpose addition will provide as much growing room as the proposed \$4.2 million construction projects would have.

### **From single-use to multiple-use**

How is it possible to teach “old church buildings new tricks” like this—to make them serve congregations far larger than those for which they were originally designed? It’s possible because of a paradigm shift taking place in the way North American Christians think about, use, and design church buildings.

Architects have been trained to design single-use church buildings: the sanctuary is used for worship, class rooms for Sunday school, the fellowship hall for dinners, the gym for recreation. Besides that, sanctuary and class rooms are generally designed with only a single session in mind. When the sanctuary or class rooms approach 80% capacity, it is time to call the architect again.

The new multiple-use paradigm doesn’t treat the building as fully utilized until multiple sessions of worship and classes are being filled and most of the building is being used for a variety of ministries at various times.

Architect Ray Bowman, author of *WHEN NOT TO BUILD* and a pioneer in this approach to church facility use, estimates that nine out of every ten churches that call him thinking they need to build actually have a better, less costly alternative.

What are some of these new tricks that old church buildings can learn?

### **The full-Sunday-school illusion**

Most churches, when they call in a facilities consultant, say their Sunday school is full or almost full. In my consulting work, I have learned that this usually means that “we have a class in every or almost every available room.” I recently walked through a church like this during their Sunday school hour. All but two of their classes had room to double or triple their attendance in their present rooms. But because all the rooms were in use, the people considered their Sunday school space full.

To fully use their education space, this church will have to make several changes. They will need to buy lightweight folding tables that children’s teachers can easily set up or take down during class. They can then use the same space for both floor and table activities rather than using half the room for each.

Supply cabinets on the floor will need to be replaced by wall-mounted cabinets. Small classes taught by solo teachers will need to grow into larger team-taught classes.

With changes like these—plus installing folding walls to create more places for teens and adults to meet—this Sunday school will have plenty of room to double. Before that happens, though, this church will be adding a second worship service and a second Sunday school session. Children’s classes will actually have room to quadruple before they need more space.

### **Too few rooms or too many classes?**

In York, Pennsylvania, is a growing congregation of 650 that could not be charged with not fully using their class rooms. Their Monday through Friday Child Care Center had long since packed out the available rooms and had a waiting list. The children’s Sunday school, junior church, and Wednesday evening children’s program were all approaching the limits of their space.

Yet a look at their children’s ministries showed that 191 volunteer workers were needed to staff the children’s Sunday school, junior church, and Wednesday evening activities. When I asked the children’s pastor, “Do you have 191 people who are called to work in children’s ministry?” she immediately expressed frustration at having to recruit workers who she knew were serving out of obligation rather than call, including some poorly qualified for that particular ministry. The results were predictable: regular recruiting hassles, worker burnout, and teaching of inconsistent quality.

The solution? The church restructured their three children’s programs (Sunday school, junior church, and Wednesday evening) into two—one on Sunday and one on Wednesday. Now only half of the children are using the class rooms during each session on Sunday. Between that and a Wednesday night adult programming change, the children’s ministries at York now have plenty of room to grow—without spending a penny on new class rooms.

Even more important, though, is the improved quality of their children’s Christian education. Rather than needing 191 adults to staff their Sunday morning and Wednesday children’s ministries, they now need 60. The people working with children now are the ones whose hearts are in it. And now all those other workers are free to work in the ministries to which God is calling them.

### **Time, space, and food**

Multiple worship services are at the heart of the multiple-use paradigm, but many church buildings are not well-suited to multiple services. After all, they were designed for single services.

What does a building suitable for double services look like? The main requirement is a large foyer or other fellowship area where those leaving the first service can visit with those arriving for the second service without causing congestion.

One concern here is traffic flow, but something even more important is at stake here. By far the most common objection to adding a second service is, “But then we won’t see our friends who go to the other service.” When a church ignores this need, its attempt at a second service often fails. So why not give those who attend the two services plenty of opportunity to fellowship with each other?

You can do this by providing three things—time, space, and food. It’s not unusual for churches to allow only fifteen minutes between services, barely enough time to get from one place to the other. I recommend that between services churches schedule a third ministry event, a half-hour fellowship time when refreshments are served.

The ideal space for this is a fellowship foyer, though a fellowship area farther from the worship space can work, at least temporarily. If a church doesn’t have a foyer large enough to comfortably

accommodate double services, sometimes the foyer can be enlarged. Adding on a new fellowship foyer is not inexpensive, but it costs far less than building a bigger sanctuary. And, of course, a fellowship foyer is extremely versatile space that can serve a wide range of ministry uses.

### **The house next door**

Most older church buildings were not designed for multiple staff. As a result, in a growing church, improvised pastor's offices are often scattered throughout the building, secretaries have too little work space, and the offices may not be welcoming to weekday visitors. If the church owns a parsonage or rent house near the church campus, in many cases an excellent solution is to convert the house next door into the church office complex. The new office center usually includes a conference room that doubles as a class room as well as other meeting rooms. Providing a housing allowance for the pastor in lieu of a parsonage is far less hassle—and normally much less expensive—than building new offices.

### **The payoff**

These are just a few of the new tricks you can teach old church buildings to multiply their capacity to handle growth. The financial benefits of this approach are obvious. Because major construction is postponed, the church buys time to get out of debt then to save up cash for future construction. Just by earning interest on the building fund rather than paying interest on a mortgage, a church can cut construction costs by as much as two-thirds. And since building for multiple-use requires fewer square feet, a church may be able to cut its construction costs by a total of 75% or even more.

The greatest benefit, though, can't be measured in dollars and cents. The real tragedy of unneeded church building programs is that they drain time, money, and energy away from ministry. Time after time a growing church has built too big, too soon only to discover that growth stops. Why? Because the church's focus changes from the ministries producing the growth to building and paying for a facility.

When we teach old buildings new tricks, it doesn't just save money; it helps us stay focused on the real work of the church—reaching out in love to hurting people who need the healing and hope only God can give.

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